

# **Migrant Women in Beijing and the Right to a Life in the City**

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# Contents

1	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	1
1.1	Background .....	1
1.1.1	“Let one segment of the population get rich first and guide others along the way” .....	2
1.1.2	The floating population .....	2
1.1.3	Migrant women and the Chinese state .....	3
1.1.4	Migrant Women’s Club .....	4
1.2	Structure .....	7
2	<b>THEORETICAL BACKGROUND</b> .....	9
2.1	<i>What characterises subordinates’ situation?</i> .....	9
2.1.1	Power .....	9
2.1.2	Power techniques .....	12
2.2	<i>How do subordinates explain their situation?</i> .....	14
2.2.1	Everyday resistance .....	15
2.2.2	Behind the scenes .....	16
2.2.3	Agency and resistance .....	18
3	<b>METHOD</b> .....	22
3.1	Background .....	22
3.2	Choices .....	24
3.3	Doing fieldwork in China .....	25
3.3.1	Overcoming language barriers .....	26
3.3.2	The informants .....	27
3.3.3	Observation and conversation as research methods .....	28
3.3.4	The interviews .....	29
3.3.5	The researcher’s position .....	32
3.4	Analysing the data .....	32

4	<b>ANALYSIS</b>	35
	<i>What characterises migrant women's situation?</i>	36
4.1	Migrants and state control	36
4.1.1	Public discourse	38
4.1.2	Values and virtues	42
4.2	The everyday life of a migrant woman	45
4.2.1	"Public school won't take him"	45
4.2.2	"Money is the key"	47
4.2.3	"How can we migrant workers rent nice houses?"	49
4.2.4	"It looks like cotton, but it is toxic"	50
	<i>How do migrant women describe their own situation?</i>	54
4.3	Eating bitterness	54
4.4	Marginalisation	55
4.4.1	"We are the lowest group in society"	55
4.5	State versus individual	58
4.5.1	"Man should live by one's own"	58
4.5.2	<i>Renming</i> - accepting one's own fate	61
4.6	Coping	62
4.6.1	"Now I feel nothing about it"	62
4.7	Agency and resistance	63
4.7.1	"To control the throat of fate"	64
4.7.2	Migrant Women's Club	67
4.7.3	Speaking bitterness	71
5	<b>CONCLUSION</b>	75
5.1	<i>Characterisations of migrant women's situation</i>	75
5.1.2	Marginalisations: State policies and public discourse	75
5.2	<i>Migrant women's descriptions of their own situation</i>	76
5.2.1	The individual	77
5.2.2	Agency and resistance: Making space	77

6	<b>REFERENCES .....</b>	80
7	<b>APPENDIX</b>	
1	Informants .....	86
2	Interview guide migrant women.....	89
3	Interview guide researchers/head of migrant organizations.....	91

# 1 Introduction

China's economic adventure has amazed the world. The backside of the medallion, however, comes in the shape of greater differences between rich and poor, between the cities and countryside and new forms of exploitation among the weakest. One of the most visible outcomes of the change of direction in the Chinese society is the millions of rural inhabitants that migrate to the larger towns and cities in order to pursue work, wealth and a better life. Despite the greater range of opportunities, what await them in the cities are state policies that restrict their and their children's chances in areas like housing, health, work and education. The public discourse concerning migrants also contributes to a marginalised situation for this group. Migrant women in particular will also experience discrimination and limitations due to their gender. However, where the Chinese state and urban society put restrictions on migrant women's lives and their possibilities to protest against their situation, people in suppressed situations find ways to resist domination.

The theme for this thesis is power and resistance in the relationship between migrant women in Beijing and the Chinese state. I have focused on Migrant Women's Club in Beijing and their members, and I will in this thesis answer these research questions:

- *What characterises migrant women's situation?*
- *How do migrant women describe their own situation?*

## 1.1 BACKGROUND

In order to describe migrant women's life it is necessary to see their situation as a part of the structures in the Chinese society. On this account, I will here describe on which background they live their life, through sketching out the direction of the Chinese economy, the floating population, and the relationship between the state, migrant women and Migrant Women's Club.

### **1.1.1 “Let one segment of the population get rich first and guide others along the way”**

The new direction of China's economy promoted the idea of creating one's own wealth, being a part of the economic adventure and contribute to stimulate the economy on the private market. The world has been witnessing the result of this new economic path the last almost 30 years; an amazing growth with an average of 9% per year (Saich 2004). On the other hand, the transition from a planned economy to a market economy has involved altering changes in the Chinese society. The declaration from Deng Xiaoping that "some has to get rich first" and the drastic changes in state policy marked the end of the old egalitarian ideals and has since led to pronounced social stratification (Zheng 2006). The differences between the rural and urban areas have existed since the days of Mao Zedong, but the liberalisation of the economy and opening up has made the gap even bigger. The cities and eastern areas have developed while the rural and western areas have been left behind. The unsatisfying situation in the countryside made many rural citizens begin their journey toward urban areas.

### **1.1.2 The floating population**

Reasons behind leaving the rural areas are concentrated around the restructuring of agriculture, the reform of the state-owned enterprises and the transition to a market-based economy. Pulled to the urban areas by the possibilities for work and the pursuit of wealth and another life, millions of rural inhabitants have migrated to the cities and urban areas, with the first big wave entering in the beginning of the 1980s. The latest official number being 120 million, this is considered the biggest peacetime wave of internal migration the world has ever seen (Jacka, 2006). Most of these migrants are so called unofficial and temporary, and a part of what in the 1950s was called a "blindly floating" population, and from the 1980s called the "floating population" (*liudong renkou*) (Bingqin Li 2006, Kam and Li 1999). This concept contains those who have moved away from their registered residence without similar registration (*hukou*) to a new place. The floating population is defined by Solinger as "people who engage in partial temporary relocation, whose registration of legal residence remains in their original of habitation and who are ineligible for permanent residence in the local into which they moved" (Solinger 1995:198). Both Solinger (1996) and Jacka (2006) describes rural-urban migrants as a product of the transition from a planned

economy to a market economy, and according to Solinger (1996) they are the symbol and scapegoat of the economic reforms. Smith (2000) argues that it is possible to interpret the current situation as simply part of the normal 'growing pains' associated with modernisation. What we see is a part of a process that is occurring in all parts of the developing world. It is similar to other populations that have become minorities as a result of immigration, a process that has been going on for centuries as migrants have attempted to incorporate themselves into the modern urban world. In this relation it is usual to be defined as undesirable others. The difference, on the other hand, between immigrants and migrants in China is that the migrants have the same citizenship as urban Chinese citizens. My findings in this thesis represent data gathered in 2007. It is important to acknowledge that policies concerning migrants and their situation change fast. However, despite certain changed conditions, migrants are still highly regulated through a household registration system, and through public discourses.

### **1.1.3 Migrant women and the Chinese state**

According to Wang (2003), a widely circulated cliché in contemporary Chinese society is that reform presents women with both opportunities and challenges. On one level the women have been represented with more opportunities. However, it is important to consider the challenges for women in general concerning gender, and in particular the differences between the women in China; between those who have ample opportunities and resources, and those who face monumental challenges. Migrant women, the focus of this thesis, belong to the last group. Rural women who are migrating to Chinese towns and cities are key agents in the global economy and in the social changes attending globalisation. They are considered an important part of the labour force, but exploitation is common and the state does not provide a safety net for this group. China wishes the recognition and respect from the rest of the world as a modern and strong nation. While in dominant discourses modernity is connected to the urban society and citizens, rural females on the other hand are considered the opposite and thereof drabbing China's identity. To understand how migrant women react to or work with the ways they are framed in such public discourses, an appreciation of what migration and life in the city means to rural women and how it affects their sense of self is essential. In addition, an examination of the particular ways in which migrant women's narratives reproduce, negotiate, and in some cases



challenge dominant discourses will greatly enrich our understanding of globalisation and social change in contemporary China. The Chinese state plays a vital role in migrant women's lives through its regulation of society. In the thesis the state is broadly defined and includes not only the central government, but also local governments and agencies and institutions.

The increased focus on migrants and their situation after 2001/2002 when their status was officially recognized has resulted in several reforms and policies concerning this group. Researchers accordingly claim that the central state do put migrants on the agenda, and try to improve their situation (Han, Gui, Tang interviews 2007). However, good intentions may be hindered on a political level. In recent years there has been a change in the relationship between the central state and the local governments. A part of the political development is a decentralisation of power, where the provincial and local governments have gotten more authority. The local governments have more power over their own resources, but if the central government decide upon a reform or policy, the local governments have to cover the expenses and use of their own resources without receiving extra funding from the central state. This top-down decision process regarding local governments resources can strain the relationship between central and local state. The central government's assessment of the local governments is strongly tied to their performance in taking care of their *hukou* citizens (Wang, interview 2007). The state government's assessment system of the local governments and municipal provinces creates a race for performing best (Tan & Short 2006). Migrants end up in the space between the central government and the local governments, and between the sending and receiving area. It is in this space the rise of organisations like Migrant Women's Club have entered.

#### **1.1.4 Migrant Women's Club**

In the void between the state's capacity and migrants' needs many organisations have sprung up. Most often these organisations see themselves as prolonged arms of the state, they see the Chinese society as too complex for the state to handle alone. Although the state recognizes their important function, these migrant organisations do not get funding to run the organisation, and though they write reports and try to influence the government about policies and regulations, it is very hard for them to get through (Han, interview 2007). Migrant Women's Club (Dagongmei zhi Jia) is

important for many migrants in Beijing. The Club was established April 7th, 1996, and describes itself as a meeting place for women from the rural areas who come to the city to work. The Club originated from the magazine Rural Women Knowing All, and is a branch of the Cultural Development Centre for Rural Women (CDCRW) It claims to be the first non-government organisation established in China for rural migrants, and it remains one of very few such bodies (Jacka 2006). Today the Club has about 1000 members, most of whom are young rural women. The Club retains close links with the All China Women's Federation (ACWF), a state mass organisation. The founder of Migrant Women's Club, Xie Lihua, is also the vice chief editor for the ACWF's paper. According to Han Huimin, the Club is not under the control of the ACWF, but they cooperate and keep in touch frequently. Migrant Women's Club also reports to the ACWC about their activities, gives recommendations about issues to improve and lobbies the cause of migrant women. In this sense there is a connection between the state and the Club in the work with improving the situation for migrants. However, such a relationship can also indicate a limited ability to help migrants. The overarching goal of the Club is to *"empower migrant women for self-protection and management."*<sup>1</sup> They want to help migrant women improve their lives in the city by teaching them about their rights, develop their skills and induce personal growth. This is provided through different activities and offers; judicial services, psychological support, emergency relief fund, support network for domestic workers, writing courses, lectures on gender relations, law, reproductive and psychological health, and analysis of economic, social and political affairs. Every other month the members of the Club gather and in 2002 they started publishing their own magazine; Migrant Women Magazine. The employees at the Migrant Women's Club are migrants themselves, and former members or volunteers. The Club is a place where migrant women meet other women in the same situation and seek support and comfort when their situation gets too challenging. Although the Chinese government in one way supports such organisations, they also fear mobilisation and social unrest.

Mallee (2003) claims that the attitude of the authorities towards migrants' self-organisation is ambiguous. On the one hand informal organisations can be used to

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.nongjianv.org/english/club.html>

control migrants, for example a close relationship between the local authorities and migrant leaders. The government has paid more attention to the managing of migrants. Service offices are established in residential areas, the ACWF and trade unions are involved, and in addition NGOs like Migrant Women's Club has been more accepted and included in the work. The government has realised that they need the help from the NGOs and their function in building a "harmonious society", but according to Han Huimin, chief at the Migrant Women's Club, the question is how the different offices and sections manage, and if the policy is right for what the migrants need (Han, interview 2007). The migrant organisations have the best knowledge about this, and here they play a vital part.

There are also examples of migrant organisations being denied state recognition or being suppressed. Wang Kan, PhD at Renmin University in Beijing and chief for On Action Migrant Labour organisation, portrays two types of scenarios; "one is that the state allows such a voice to be raised, or, the state doesn't like it, so they will close down these NGOs". Analogous to the semi-legal status of their members, migrant organisations are engaged in a continuous balancing act, compromising between interest representation and breaking the (unclear) limits set by the authorities (Mallee 2003). Some will say that there doesn't even exist any non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in China due to the fact that every organisation that is established has to be registered with a ministry to be allowed to work. As the upper responsible organ for an organisation the ministry will also have the supervision of every activity and thereof the state has full control (Saich 2000). To register an NGO the organisation also has to find a supervisor within the government. This person has the power to shut down the organisation without giving any explanations (Saich 2000). Wang Kan explains that his organisation On Action Migrant Labour is registered as a consulting firm, under the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, which is also the case for Migrant Women's Club. When commercially registered they cannot legally promote themselves in public because such activities are not stated in their business licence. Sometimes the government make use of the fact that these types of organisations are registered under specific ministries with special licences. For example, according to Wang (2007), in the summer of 2006 there was an incident in the South of China where around 20-30 NGOs commercially registered in Shenzhen and Guangzhou together wrote a petition letter to the Guangdong provincial

government protesting against the high arbitration fee. The Guangdong government, not satisfied with this protest, found loopholes in their business licences and withdrew them so that they did not have the opportunity to run their organisations any more.

## **1.2 STRUCTURE**

### *Theory, chapter 2*

In this chapter I will first address the notion of power and power techniques. In a relationship between the state and the individual, power can be seen as A's power to get B to do something he does not want to, but in this thesis a notion of power as containing both the existence of domination and resistance is fruitful. In the way that it shapes migrant women's situation in Beijing, it is necessary to look at the notion of governmentality, the art or strategies of governing practices that aim to shape the mind and behaviour of people through social domains and institutions. I will in this sense refer to different power techniques, and especially the use of discourse. To describe the women's resistance I address theories of everyday resistance, false consciousness and public and hidden transcript.

### *Method, chapter 3*

In this part of the thesis, I will outline my scientific stand and address the choice of Migrant Women's Club and Beijing as my research site. Coincidences often characterise choices and the fieldwork itself, and this was no exception in my case. Doing fieldwork in China posed many challenges, in the shape of language barriers and getting in contact with researchers. However, my research also brought great experiences, and I will further in this chapter describe my experiences with qualitative method, observation and conversation as a research form, and discuss the positive and negative sides of the use of such methods.

### *Analysis, chapter 4*

This chapter will contain my findings and the discussion of these in relation to the theory framework outlined in the theory chapter. First I will sketch out what characterises migrant women's situation. The data portrays a marginalised life affected by public discourse and limitations due to state policies. In the urban society migrant women are alienated, restricted and looked upon as passive, compliant

subjects. The other part of the analysis concerns the migrant women's subjective apprehensions of their situation, and I show that the Migrant Women's Club offer the women an alternative identity and empower them. Although migrant women are considered as subjects without voices, the women's membership at the Club, and their expressions show that they are active agents who, on different levels, resist the state's domination.

#### *Conclusion, chapter 5*

Here I will discuss the findings in the analysis, and address some ideas for future research.

## 2 Theoretical background

### *Introduction*

In the previous chapter a general background for migrant women's situation was outlined. The Chinese society is characterised by huge differences between urban and rural areas. Migrant women are placed between traditional and modern expectations, and between the central and local state. In the void Migrant Women's Club can be seen as an alternative player. In the following chapter I will provide a theoretical background for discussing the relationship between state and society, between power holders and dominated groups. The aim is to look at what characterises subordinate's situation and analyse how oppressed groups apprehend their situation and position in society. Related to this study migrant women's lives are thoroughly shaped by the dominant discourses, regulations and policies employed by the Chinese state, and due to the state's use of power techniques their considerations are affected by this marginalisation. On the other hand, I argue that there exist spaces for subordinates to employ strategies of resistance. The following discussion starts by discussing the concept of power and power techniques in order to try to explain what characterises marginalised people's situation. I will further look at how resistance can take place in relations of domination by addressing theories on everyday resistance and agency.

### *2.1 What characterises subordinates' situation?*

The relationship between different groups in society is characterised by differences in power. Those in power wish to uphold this structure by employing different power techniques and control the life of the subordinates. However, both the concept of power and power techniques can indicate more than a one-way dominance.

#### **2.1.1 Power**

The concept of power is widely discussed, and the different definitions provided by different theoretical directions relate to their general perspective on questions within the philosophy of science. Lukes (2005) discusses three views of power, a one-, two- and three-dimensional approach. The one-dimensional view of power focuses on individuals' concrete, observable behaviour in decision-making over issues that involve an observable conflict. This approach refers to power as person A having the

power to get person B to do something he would not otherwise do (Lukes 2005). Exercising power thus imply that the participant who “wins” the majority of discussions, who has the biggest portion of successes in decision-making, should be defined as the most influential. Dahl (1961) insists that power can be analysed only after examining a series of such concrete decisions. Further, representatives of the one-dimensional view point out the crucial aspect of conflict between preferences in examining power. Among others, Polsby (1963) assumes that preferences are consciously made, people are not mistaken about or unaware of their own interests. People’s preferences then are exhibited in actions and can therefore be discovered by observing people’s behaviour. This approach is referred to as pluralist, indicating that “since different actors and different interest groups prevail in different issue-areas, there is no overall ‘ruling elite’ and power is distributed pluralistically (Lukes 2005:5). Discussing the critique of this view, Lukes describes how the two-dimensional view contrasts to the behavioural stand of the one-dimensional approach. In matter of power relations Lukes point to how this view introduces the question of control over the agenda of politics, and the prevention of potential issues from the political process. Bachrach and Baratz (1970) here argue that power has two faces, and introduces the idea of ‘mobilisation of bias’. Power relations not only involve the aspect of a conscious decision-making process, but also a nondecision-making process, that also involves observable decisions. Lukes criticises both approaches for their behavioural focus, and introduces a three-dimensional view where he considers the ways potential issues are kept out of politics, whether through the operation of social forces and institutional practices or through individual’s decisions. Decisions are here seen as conscious choices, and the real interests of those excluded may not be expressed or they may not even be conscious about them. Further in contrast with the two-dimensional approach, the insistence on actual conflict as essential to power is considered to fall through on two accounts. First, because certain types of power like manipulation and authority, may not involve a conflict, and secondly because it is not only through A exercising power over B to get him to do what he does not want to do that power is exercised, but also through controlling B’s thoughts and desires. Thought control can involve the control of information, through the mass media or through the processes of socialisation. Seeing this in relation to what characterises people in marginalised situations, like the migrant women, we see that the state subjects their citizens to a sort of indoctrination and plays a role in shaping their

preferences. Lukes (2005) concludes that a deeper analysis of power relations, meaning at once value-laden, theoretical and empirical, is possible.

Giddens' (1984) conceptualisation of power implies that power is a transformative capacity, and that in the relationship between power holders and subordinates there will exist spaces the subordinates can use to influence the activities of the power holders. Giddens distinguishes between allocative and authoritative resources, indicating control of resources and control over people and their activities, respectively. He argues that it is necessary to look at the relationship between these two categories in order to understand the dynamics of social change. Power and resources are thus related, however controlling the first does not constitute the second. What thereof characterises Giddens' definition of power is that both the dominants and the subordinates can affect the relationship.

Spaces for influence are also central to Michel Foucault's notion of power. Foucault describes power as productive; although it limits people's lives in many areas, it is never solely a negative force, neither will it penetrate every domain of their lives, but rather leave spaces of freedom. The acceptance of power has bases in its positive aspects, in that it also produces discourse, forms knowledge and induces pleasure (Foucault 1980). Foucault argues that productive power, the capillary power seen as power over life, is not expressed explicitly and brutal, but rather in more "silent" ways through the work of institutions, discourses and relations which make people who they are (Sæther 2008). Critics of Foucault's studies underline that forms of control may be more direct and arbitrary than what he describes, and point to the value of approaching power from a contextual point of view. However, Foucault's concepts of power are not inadequate for explaining the techniques in which power is wielded. In understanding how the Chinese state exercise power over migrants, the notion of power as containing both the existence of domination and resistance is a helpful tool. However, in an analysis addressing state-society relations an account of what direct means the state use to shape individual's situation is necessary.



### 2.1.2 Power techniques

When addressing power, it is also important to consider the relational nature of power relations and the structures behind domination and repression. Here we can look at the concept of hegemony, and on hegemonic techniques. Both Gramsci's (1971) and Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) approaches to the concept of hegemony focus on its ability to appear natural and self-evident. For Gramsci hegemony contains how the state balances between its own wishes and the subordinate's wishes. To get the consent to rule from the subordinates, the state has to take their interests into consideration. Although Gramsci, in contrast to Laclau and Mouffe, opens for that everyday practice can be seen as resistance, he rather looks at the influence of the values of the dominant class. In this way none of the theoretical directions explain social change and how people form counter discourses to express and create opposition. If relations of domination are unable to conquer the consciousness of the suppressed, hegemony can never be fully achieved. However, in order to shape and influence people power-holders can exercise different methods of different nature.

For moving beyond the dichotomy of state versus society Foucault's notion of "governmentality" is particularly useful. Governmentality can be described as the art of governing activities, which is articulated through processes both inside and outside the state. Different social institutions and informal social networks can all function as regimes of power that shape people's sense of self and conduct. In this sense the term of governmentality is used to refer to the art or strategies of governing practices that aim to shape, guide, and affect the mind and conduct of persons through multilevel social domains such as the family, community, discourse, and other social institutions (Foucault 1991, Gordon 1991, Ong 1999). Examining modes of governing strategies in diverse social realms is essential for this thesis because, as I will show, turning migrant women into subjects is made by formal state agencies and other social elements. Shurmer-Smith and Hannam (1994) address Foucault's identification of four power techniques that contribute to creating compliant subjects. *Scientific classification* implies the gathering of information and categorisation of single persons and groups according to established categories, which is closely connected to the state administration of the population. As Giddens (1987) claims, the state is the most prominent power-holder in the modern society. This implies that it is primarily within the state that authoritative resources are concentrated, with its administrative

power being based on control of gathering and storage information. Foucault further addresses *hierarchic observation*, which involves institutionalised supervision of subordinate subjects. Such supervision is done within a number of situations in everyday life, for example at the workplace, in school, by use of public and private communication services, by purchase of goods and services, in prisons and in health institutions. While Foucault's notion of *normalising judgement* contains an evaluation of single persons according to norms for "correct" behaviour followed by a reward or punishment, *examination* includes procedures to establish a "truth" about a relation, which may be tests in school, medical or psychological tests or interrogations within the justice system. Such tests also make a basis for scientific classification or normalising judgement. Concerning the control of migrants in the Chinese society the state especially take use of scientific classification, normalising judgement and examination. These concepts can be related to processes of making people into compliant subjects, and I will here turn to Foucault's studies on discourse and subject formations.

### *Subjects*

Discourses involve particular relations of power, embodied and reproduced in knowledge and language about subordinates. The process of subject formations, Foucault argues, is closely connected to knowledge and power. Foucault's understanding of this relationship contains that knowledge should be understood as discourses, where such discourses include constructions of social identities and norms that are portrayed as "normal" or "abnormal". Discourses entail different power relations in the sense that they dictate the rules and conditions for thoughts, actions and feelings. Variations of these rules exist in different times, in different societies and from one discourse to another within the same society or culture. Through discourses we learn to enact categories of identity, or subject positions. However, every human experience, while unique, is also shaped by social practices. As Stokke (1999) describes, the attachment of an identity indicates that people are made into subjects, and thereof objects for exercising power. In themselves such constructions of identities and norms involve exercising power. A dominant state discourse and popular discourse can cast a group as inferior, deviant, outsiders and in essential ways different from the rest of society, in this thesis like migrants. Such a dominating discourse can contribute to this excluded group constructing their identities and

understanding their experiences both in reaction to and within the framework of this discourse (Jacka 2006). Stokke (1999) describes an example where heterosexuality is seen as a discursive construction and a “natural” form of sexuality in contrast to the “un-natural” nature of homosexuality. The sanctions exercised according to such constructions, adds to the suppressive actions that leads to a subjectivisation of people. So in one way individuals can be seen as objects determined by forms of control, however, in another such power techniques can be challenged through acts of resistance.

## ***2.2 How do subordinates explain their own situation?***

People who have lived under an authoritarian rule for a long time, may in one way seem to have the rules and procedures of the everyday life incorporated “in their backbone”. By taking away the freedom to organise and freedom of speech some states ensure that any eventual battle will only be between the individual and the mighty authorities. Such a battle is among marginalised people considered useless. The implementation of power techniques shape political space, and in the near lack of this space mobilisation is regarded as a high-risk activity for subordinates. In one way a seeming acceptance can find ground in that oppressed groups have no other option than to accept their situation. This is especially evident in the life of Lebanese people during the war against Israel, described in Thomas L. Friedman’s book; “From Beirut to Jerusalem”. Friedman portrays how people learn to adapt because they don’t have another choice, how they use rationalisation for reasons behind deaths to cope, and how they learned how to view their environment selectively, to cope with the situation, to be able to go on living their life. Further Friedman talks about how “part of learning how to view one’s environment selectively is learning to make oneself numb to some of the more grotesque scenes that are part of the texture life in Beirut” (1990:39). This “numbness” is highly relevant for how migrant women describe their situation as well. Marginalised people may often characterise their life through such a sense of disempowerment. Poor, uneducated citizens feel they cannot make a difference anyway and the only option is therefore to knuckle under. The generation ambition is also evident in this relation. Subordinates endure the situation so that their children will have a better life than themselves. But is it this simple? Does a “weaker” group simply comply or do they exercise any type of resistance?

### 2.2.1 Everyday resistance

Opposed to liberal and radical development researchers, J.C Scott, an important contributor in matters of informal politics, claims that even though there is no public mobilisation among marginalised groups there exist disguised and veiled forms of autonomous resistance. Scott (1989) refers to this as everyday resistance, and defines it as actions from subordinates that oppose demands from superior persons, groups and institutions. According to Scott there are different types of resistance in relation to different types of dominion. A material rule can imply resistance in the shape of tax fraud, stealing and sabotage, while humiliation, lack of privileges, attack on subordinates' dignity and creating ideological dominion that justifies slavery, casts, privileges and general social differences also are forms of domination subject to resistance. Such resistance then involves hidden forms of aggression and alternative discourses, for example through myth class heroes. Following Scott we can see two common traits among these techniques of resistance; they are hidden, and they do not require any, or little, coordination and planning. The critique of Scott's analysis suggest that such strategies make no difference in society, and that they only can be seen as individual and selfish. Scott replies to this critique by making the point that everyday resistance is coordinated through informal social networks, "everyone" knows what is going on. Although Scott accepts that everyday resistance is based on the subordinates' own interests, he outlines that it would be wrong to make a divide between "good" and "bad" mobilisation. Another critique of Scott's studies involves how everyday resistance will function as a safety valve for the system. Letting out steam, frustrations over their situation through hidden actions will according to the critiques not make any difference in changing the structures, but rather contribute to uphold them. Scott (1990) describes that a type of self-control and indirection as required of the powerless to survive in a repressed society, but with enough people taking part in actions of everyday resistance, society will change.

The action of "letting off steam" is by Scott referred to as the hydraulic metaphor. He describes an example with young black slaves in the United States;

"Nowhere is the training in self-control more apparent than in the tradition of the "dozens" or "dirty dozens" (...). The dozens consist in two blacks trading rhymed insults of one another's

family (especially mothers and sisters); victory is achieved by never losing one's temper and fighting, but rather in devising ever more clever insults so as to win the purely verbal duel. Whereas the aristocrat is trained to move every serious verbal insult into the terrain of mortal combat, the powerless are trained to absorb insults without retaliating physically." (Scott 1990:136-137).

This aspect of everyday resistance is particularly relevant concerning the women taking in the Migrant Women's Club's activities. However, as with other forms of everyday resistance such strategies should be seen as used more consciously than just a safety valve. People in marginalised situations employ strategies based on conscious considerations. Such expressed frustrations can therefore be seen as disguised political messages. However, the fear of reprimands in the context of domination, forces the powerless to conceal their messages.

### **2.2.2 Behind the scenes**

Scott (1990) addresses that the power relationship between the dominant and the subordinate is upheld by the power holder keeping up the appearances and the dominated helping sustain or not openly contradict these appearances. However, Scott claims that this power relationship is still not a "natural" one, and argues that one should pay attention to what may lie beneath the surface. Debates about power and ideology question the conformity of the less powerful, in situations where there is no apparent use of coercion. Addressing the seemingly passive position and the acceptance and consent to their situation, it would likewise be an easy way out to use the concept of false consciousness. Scott argues that previous theories on hegemony have failed to recognize the conscious resistance, and rather has focused on what he calls thick or thin theories of false consciousness (Scott 1990). The thick version refers to power holders making the subordinates believe in the rationale behind their suppression, that the limitations in their life is for their own best, while the thin version, on the other hand, implies that the subordinates see no other option than to accept the situation as the natural one. The powerless are indoctrinated with discourses of such evident character. Scott insists, however, that no one will passively accept bad treatment. A limited political space can on the other hand repress any open protest. Due to the risk of mobilising, ideological resistance will then be hidden and veiled for safety's sake. One can see it as repressed groups use masks as tactics, and the more menacing the power the thicker the mask.

Further Scott claims that there are different arenas for different types of communication. He talks of the creation of an on- and offstage space, whereas onstage the communication is open, and offstage it is secret. This is referred to correspondingly as public and hidden transcript. The term public transcript involves “as a shorthand way of describing the open interaction between the subordinates and those who dominate” (Scott 1990:2). This scene represents the hegemonic discourse of the powerful, while the term introduced by Scott as the hidden transcript “characterises discourse that takes place “offstage”, beyond direct observation of power holders” (Scott 1990:4). This means that publicly, subordinates comply with the power holders, while behind the scenes, behind the dominant’s backs, the dominated dare to voice critique. The conscious critique is present among subordinates, but for safety the hidden transcript is only revealed among peers. However, statements made in power-laden contexts and offstage cannot be straightforward characterised as false or true. But what is evident is that the hidden transcript is produced for a different audience and under different constraints of power than the public transcript, and only by “assessing the discrepancy *between* the hidden transcript and the public transcript we may begin to judge the impact of domination on public discourse” (Scott 1990:5). Scott further describes that the hidden transcript is thus derivative in the sense that it consists of those offstage speeches, gestures, and practices that confirm, contradict, or inflect what appears in the public transcript. Defiance then, should be seen between the onstage and offstage scenes. In contrast to a passiveness, Scott emphasises the opposition in people who experience unfair treatment. Foucault (1980) points out that there is a dialectic relationship between subjectivising power techniques and resistance. Resistance is possible because the process of subject formations occur through uncoordinated power techniques. As introduced earlier related to Foucault’s and Giddens’ concepts of power, Scott (1990) underlines the existence of such spaces of freedom. He claims that there is a social space for subordinates outside the immediate control of the dominant, in which a shared critique of domination may develop. Subordinates have several strategies to sneak in their resistance, in veil, into the public transcript. The lack of political space and realities of subordinate’s power indicate that nothing is straightforward; much of this group’s political actions require interpretation precisely because it is intended to be cryptic and concealed. So following Scott, there exists a conscious reaction from

subordinates, despite the different forms of domination, which they will consciously and actively develop to counter strategies of resistance.

### **2.2.3 Agency and resistance**

Human agency is thoroughly social and discursive, but is made possible by the fact that society consists of numerous different, competing discourses, and within any one discourse a variety of subject positions are available. Discourses confer the ability to make choices between these various subject positions, but the intimate relation between discourse, knowledge, and power is such that some people will be able to imagine a greater range of subject positions than others, and will be better placed to choose which of those to enact. Furthermore, there is always a hierarchy between different discourses and subject positions. A subject performs and creates herself and her life but are constrained by a certain broadly held understandings of what particular subject positions entail and of how, when, and by whom, they can be performed (Kenyon 1996:27-28). To discount human agency would be to say that people are completely helpless victims blindly accepting whatever situation. Understanding the agency role is central to recognizing people as responsible persons: not only are we well or ill, but we also act or refuse to act, and can choose to act one way rather than another. “We- women *and* men- must take responsibility for doing things or not doing them” (Sen 1999:190). Developing strategies implies a will, a strength, to oppose a suppressing situation. In employing such counter strategies people can be viewed as active agents. Following Amartya Sen’s theory (1983, 1991, 1992) of capabilities, a person’s well being and agency is determined by the achieved “functionings”, indicating the “beings” and “doings” that a person values. Sen uses the concept of functionings to describe a person’s accomplishments, and outlines that

“the relevant functionings can vary from such elementary things as being adequately nourished, being in good health, avoiding escapable morbidity and premature mortality, to more complex achievements such as being happy, having self-respect, taking part in the life of community, and so on.” (Sen 1992:39).

Thus, the capability to achieve functionings will constitute the person’s freedom, the real opportunities, to have well-being and agency (Sen 1992). An important point for Sen is also that development on a macro level is dependant on people having a minimum of opportunities on a micro level. The philosopher Martha Nussbaum has

developed Sen's notion further and introduces a list of criteria she calls a threshold of capabilities. This implies that the lowest degree of possibilities on different areas in life a person needs to inhabit to live well. In addition to education and health, she mentions bodily integrity, freedom of thinking for oneself, and the right to self respect and being treated with respect. The concrete content of these categories will depend on time and place. According to Sen, achieving functionings also requires access to resources such as money, land, labour, social networks and information. People may need different resources to attain the same functionings depending on their personal characteristics, such as marital status, age, and health, as well as on socioeconomic status and cultural context. The potential to achieve a functioning is by Sen referred to as a "capability" and he argues that people exercise agency when they decide which capabilities to convert into functionings. Sen uses the notion of capability to indicate a space within which comparisons of quality of life are most fruitfully made (Nussbaum 2000). He insists that it is within the space of capabilities that questions about social equality and inequality are best raised. Exercising agency and "choosing freely" are important because they maximise the alternatives available, and hence, the chance to well-being.

Elements that can constrain women's wellbeing and opportunities for agency are lack of access to resources and also the internalisation of norms about the way things are, accepting subject positions relating to gender, age, kinship and class. Poor, uneducated people's subordinate position pose particular challenges for their exercise of agency and achievement of well-being. The relative respect and regard for women's well-being is strongly influenced by such variables as women's ability to earn an independent income, to find employment outside the home, to have ownership rights, and to have literacy and be educated participants in decisions within and outside the family. These different aspects contribute to women's voice and agency-through independence and empowerment. Working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and society (Sen 1999). Some marginalised individuals adapt their expectations to what seems possible and thus reproducing their subordinate social position. Scott (1990) also underline that, though rare, the public performance of subordinates will, with the aim of casting off in respect and belongingness, be shaped to be in line with the expectations of the power holders.



Academics and politicians from western countries are often accused of pushing their values and ways of thinking on other countries. However, I, as does Bruusgaard (2002), believe that it is possible to use the criteria of Nussbaum and Sen. Nussbaum expresses it like this:

(..) far from being colonialist, ideas of individual life-control and life planning are an expression of the struggle against colonialism. People don't need Western philosophers to tell them that they don't like to be pushed around by the world, or to live in a condition of helplessness (Nussbaum 2000:68).

People in marginalised situations will on some level take action against the suppression. Sen's theory suggests that people with access to resources and also broadened perspectives to consider alternatives to received norms are most able to exercise agency. For migrant women, in the act of going to and working in the city and attending Migrant Women's Club, lies the potential to increase resources, broaden their perspectives and challenge norms. Making use of their opportunities for agency, subordinates can exercise resistance and oppose domination by power-holders. Resistance can be exercised in different ways and on different arenas, and existing identity and norm constructions can be challenged through alternative discourses. Identities are not fixed attributes, but rather a continual shifting between overlapping and conflicting subject positions (Jacka 2006). This implies the opportunity to choose between various subject positions, but also to create alternative ones. Although being pushed into different subject positions subordinates also move beyond these identities. They can be seen as agents who actively shape and alter subject positions.

### ***Summing up***

This chapter has addressed the question of how resistance is possible in relations of domination. As a background for the analysis of this thesis I have discussed different theories of power, from the behavioural-focused pluralist view and theories including also the aspect of non-decision making, to analysis of power involving the conscious strategies of individuals. Foucault and Giddens speak of a conceptualisation of power that leaves spaces of freedom in the relationship between power-holder and subordinate. Although subject to different power techniques, the powerless use these

spaces consciously, in hidden and veiled ways to avoid punishment. On this account subordinates can be seen as active agents.

## 3 Method

### *Introduction*

In every research project the choice of method will be related to the researcher's background and scientific convictions. How one researcher decides to go forward with her research may differ from another, every individual seeks different information and has different perspectives on what fits them and their research project. Throughout the research project reflections and understanding about the research situation, the data and the informants develop. The basis for these views has to be seen in relation to what background and understanding the researcher brought into the project. My research questions are connected to my background and these questions are decisive for my choice of method. I will in the first part of the chapter outline on what background I have done this research. I have used qualitative method in gathering the data material for this thesis, and will therefore further discuss the different positive and negative sides of conversations and observation as forms of research, before looking at the way of analysing my data.

### **3.1 BACKGROUND**

In my thesis one of the aims is to describe migrant women's situation. In this relation there is a need for seeing how these women's situation is a part of the structures in Chinese society. The hermeneutic approach highlights the importance of interpreting people's actions by focusing on the deeper meaning of the actions than what one instantly sees it as. Hermeneutics is based on the principle that a meaning can only be understood in light of the connection to what we are studying is a part of. It also emphasises that there are no absolute truths, but that it is possible to interpret phenomena on different levels. In this view knowledge is seen as a construction. Dwyer and Limb (2001) share this stand and claim that a philosophical starting point for researchers using qualitative methodologies is that knowledge is situated and partial. They see knowledge as based upon "a recognition of the social world as something that is not fixed or easily known but that is made up of competing social constructions, representations and performances" (Limb and Dwyer 2001:8). By looking at what people say and how they act as discourses, one can reveal or make social relations clearer. As a researcher one cannot find objective data and present this

as the truth. Rather, what one can do is to try to achieve knowledge about these constructions and try to pass on this knowledge (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994). This implies that what oneself is passing on is also a construction. Although knowledge is a construction this does not mean that it is unreal or fake. It is a sincere interpretation of reality. I will, as a researcher, try to interpret my informants' interpretation of reality. This includes an interpretation of a second degree, or double hermeneutic, in that I interpret a reality that is already interpreted by those who participate in the same reality (Giddens 1976). In this thesis I focus on resistance in veiled, hidden forms. Interpretations of a third degree involve the researchers' interpretations of actions, based on theories that focus on the action's hidden or disguised meaning. The aim is here to reveal the meanings of the action that are not recognized by the participant herself. The hermeneutical approach stretches far in looking at actions as texts that can be interpreted. It is therefore important that actions can both be valued from their communicative meaning and in relation to the consequences the actions lead to. Critical theory is described by Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994) as triple hermeneutics. This view involves a double hermeneutic and also a critical interpretation of those relations in society that affect both the informant and the researcher. The focus is on the processes that contribute to certain interests being highlighted on the behalf of others. A society is characterised by some structures that make up relatively lasting institutions, laws, norms and customs. As outlined in the theory chapter it is not a one-way power relation between state and society. The permanent structures give strong directions to what the actors can or want to do, but actions that challenge the structures can also contribute to changing these in the long run (Alvesson and Sköldberg 1994). Concerning the migrant women and the Migrant Women's Club I see them as actors in society that operate within the boundaries put up by the Chinese state, but also as actors trying to move beyond these boundaries and in the long run trying to change society.

My other aim in this study is to get knowledge on how the migrant women themselves apprehend their life situation in Beijing. Related to postmodernist perspectives I have emphasised how informants portray their experiences, as well as the conversations between informant and researcher. This approach focuses on the underlying rules for how people within a culture talk about certain themes. According to Foucault, language defines categories that can influence the creation of institutions (Neumann

2001). Both institutions and actions can be read as language, and in this relation all sides of society are available in the discourse. Focus on contradictions between different discourses that are represented in the way people express themselves, is a central aspect of studies on how identity is shaped in the modern society. Foucault is on the same page as the constructionists when he claims that only through discourses or representations can we get a hold on the material reality. These representations or discourses can be interpreted and given meaning, and in discourse analysis the main point is to analyse meaning as a part of the general social setting where meaning is formed. For me it is useful to look at the migrant women's expressions and actions as a discourse about women's lives and opportunities. In this sense feminist theory is an approach that includes making gender the main focus in every relation, and that gender relation is seen in connection with power and oppression (Thagaard 1998). Researchers focusing on women have to a large degree used qualitative methods, because the focus is on the informant's perspective. These researchers mainly focus on women's everyday lives, where interpretations of women's actions are central, and in this way qualitative methods give a good understanding of women's life situation.

### **3.2 CHOICES**

I bring some of the most marginalised figures in Chinese society, rural migrant women, into the centre of my analysis which I think can exemplify state-society relations in China and the Chinese society. My other source of information for this thesis is the researchers and leaders for migrant organisations, whom I chose to interview for another, more official perspective on migrant women's situation. Choosing Beijing as the site for my fieldwork was related to my existing contact with the Cultural Development Centre for Rural Women and Mr. He Zhenglun, at the time deputy secretary general for this organisation. Receiving a language scholarship for a year of studies of Chinese language in the Beijing added of course to choosing the city as the site for my research. The contact with Mr. He led me to the Migrant Women's Club, which I considered to be a good starting point for finding women to interview. The Club's status as a so called non-governmental organisation made it an interesting site for investigation in relation to state-society relations.

### 3.3 DOING FIELDWORK IN CHINA

Preparing for doing fieldwork, one often has a glorified, unrealistic vision of how the research process is going to be. Reading all the advice on how to do (a) great fieldwork, I had high expectations that I would manage to get everything right; find the right informants, tie close relations with everyone and perform good interviews that would provide me with interesting data. However, doing research in general, and doing research in China in particular, poses several obstacles and limitations. In contacting people I wanted to interview or making appointments for interviews before arriving in China, I experienced great difficulties. It turned out that I had to wait till I actually was in Beijing to schedule interviews. The language was another barrier. When doing research on China, experts and researchers project an image of the necessity of mastering the Chinese language to do a qualified research (Sæther 2008). I had a great interest in learning the language, but this made me feel that I had to study Mandarin for my research to be accepted. In the end I decided to accept the language scholarship and spend a year in Beijing.

With no prior knowledge of Mandarin I arrived in Beijing in September 2007. The language was a great hinder in the beginning as I tried to create a life for myself, and trying to make myself understood took all my energy. First I wanted to get in touch with the researcher group and e-mailed the people He Zhenglun had suggested. However, as before coming to China, I received next to no answers. Trying to contact possible informants per telephone was hard in the beginning as I saw it as necessary to manage Mandarin to speak to them, and adding to the stress of trying to adjust to life in China, not inhabiting this knowledge made the effort seem too great at that point. After some weeks, however, I made friends that either mastered Chinese well or were Chinese and this way I got help in contacting people. I did try many different angles to pursue getting in contact with interview objects, for example asking the informants I had already talked to, talking to a professor of one of my friend's classes and contacting the Norwegian Centre for Human Rights. Many were hard to get a hold of, and this often relies on the Chinese society being based on *guanxi* (social relations). This system of social connections implies that people make use of each other to achieve certain things. It is based on the incentives of knowing the right people, and scratching each other's backs when needed. In this regard contacting them on my

own, with status as only a student, I would not be viewed as a good connection. However, when a former contact of them made a request on my behalf they considered it worth the while. As I got one foot in, the snowball started to roll and at the end of my stay I met with people I had been trying to reach for many months. In some ways I see it as I could have done more in the beginning of the fieldwork, but the feeling of being an outsider and not mastering the language was highly present. at the same time I believe I managed to achieve a lot the first months, and I managed to maintain persistent and positive about the project despite many challenges. Regarding finding migrant women to interview I came in contact with Han Huimin, chief of the Migrant Women's Club, through He Zhenglun. Ms. Han helped me get in touch with the migrant women who attended the Club's activities and their computer course. I was also invited to join an activity at a migrant school where I talked to the teachers and spoke to and observed the children. The access to informants was greatly affected by the chief and employees at the Club. In most cases they asked members if they would consider being interviewed, and I have little control over to what degree they persuaded the women into doing this or not. However, the majority of the women I interviewed seemed comfortable with the interview situation. The women I met outside the Club, however, did not give particularly different answers than the Club's members. The difference was more related to the informant's place and role in Migrant Women's Club. My fieldwork lasted throughout the year I spent in Beijing from 2006-2007, but the interviews were conducted at the end of my stay, from April till June 2007. This was due to wishing to have acquired a sufficient level of Mandarin to perform the interviews independently.

### **3.3.1 Overcoming language barriers**

My goal with studying Mandarin was to be able to perform the interviews by myself, which I managed at the end of my stay in Beijing, when most of the interviews with the women were conducted. However, with no prior knowledge of the language, I took the decision to have a research assistant present during the interviews in case of misunderstandings. The first interviews I did was accompanied by my Australian friend who had studied Chinese for five years and had two longer stays in China behind her. However, the majority of the interviews were conducted in cooperation with a 25-year-old Chinese journalist. I came in contact with her through a friend, and by pure luck it turned out that she had spent three years in Volda taking her bachelor

in journalism, and therefore spoke Norwegian well. Where her knowledge of Norwegian or mine of Chinese failed, we spoke English. Due to her language skills and background in journalism she was the ideal research assistant. It was also important to have a woman with me, not only for the relationship between the two of us, but also because the main interview objects were women. In China the traditional norms regarding the social interference between man and woman involves notions of propriety and obedience/inferiority, and the answers would have been affected by these social rules. Although my interpreter was not a migrant in the same way as the informants due to her high education and fluency in several languages and thus considered a part of the educated elite, she was still from another province than Beijing and in several cases the same province as some of the women that were interviewed. In some way this led to a more relaxed interview situation and made the connection stronger and the communication easier.

### **3.3.2 The informants**

During my stay in Beijing I participated in activities run by the Migrant Women's Club, interviewing Club members and others. Altogether I conducted formal, taped interviews with 12 female members of the Club, 3 migrant women from another migrant organisation and 8 interviews with researchers and leaders for migrant organisations. The researchers were from different institutions with different positions; a professor in Sociology at Renmin University of China, a PhD student from the same university who also ran a migrant organisation called On action Migrant Labour. I also interviewed a researcher from Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), a professor who currently had a position at the Human Resources research centre at Beijing Industry University, and the heads of the organisations Migrant Worker's Friend, Migrant Women's Club, Facilitator, and the former head of Cultural Development Centre for Rural women. The migrant women I interviewed came from rural areas all over China and ranged in age from 20 to 46. Most worked or had worked within cleaning and at factories, one woman ran her own tea store, some were unemployed at the time of the interviews, and some of the women held a paid job or internship at the Migrant Women's Club. Nine were married with children, the rest were unmarried and childless. Two women had been in Beijing for just a few months, but the remainder had lived there for at least one year. Two had been in Beijing for more than 10 years. The interviews were mostly conducted with women



who attended the computer course, and the interviews took place in relation to the course, at the Club's offices or the other site for course a migrant school in Haidian district in the north western part of Beijing. I also did interviews with three women connected to another migrant organisation (Migrant Worker's Friend) in Beijing. In addition to the formal interviews, I also had informal conversations with the women, for example when I attended some of the activities at the Club. When visiting a migrant school in Haidian district I also spoke with one of the teachers. The migrant women were interviewed for the empirical data about their life situation, and the researchers for information about the *hukou* system, the state's regulations and other structures in Chinese society. Participating in activities, visiting their places of living I had the chance to observe the women in their everyday settings, and through interviews I got their subjective opinions on their lives and situation in Beijing. Making use of observation and conversation as research methods opens for flexibility and closeness, but also poses many challenges.

### **3.3.3 Observation and conversation as research methods**

Qualitative studies may be directed towards studies of behaviour, and co-existence between people. Through observations in the field the researcher can gain an insight into how people relate to each other and an understanding of their lives. By attending the activities at the Migrant Women's Club and the computer course I got the opportunity to observe how the informants associated with each other. I could get an impression of how they talked together, how they interacted with those who worked at the Club and their general behaviour. In relation to using observation as a method one has to consider whether to be a participatory or a passive observer. In my case I had no possibility to "hide", nor did I wish to do this out of ethical reasons. Where I lacked the language knowledge to fully participate in line with the migrant women, my observation had to occur through my research assistant and may therefore be coloured by her apprehension of the situations. The method of observation was a great tool in my research, but I also wanted to get more insight about the women's own thoughts and feelings.

In qualitative studies the researchers aims to gain an insight into social phenomena in the ways they are understood by the informants themselves. The conversation is a good point of departure for achieving knowledge about how people experience and

reflect on their own situation. Interviews are generally unstructured or semi-structured. In other words, “they take a conversational, fluid form, each interview varying according to the interests, experiences and views of the interviewees” (Valentine 1997:110). The advantage of this approach is that the informant can explain her story with her own words. A research interview is a conversation that aims to get descriptions of the reality of the person that is being interviewed. These descriptions will later be subject to interpretation and given further meaning by the researcher (Kvale 1997). Although such conversations can give a lot and contradictory information, this can in turn contribute to giving a more nuanced picture of the world than other methods.

### **3.3.4 The interviews**

Characteristic for both participating observation and interviews is that the researcher establishes a direct contact with the interview objects. The degree of closeness of the relationship affects the data material, and there are many ethical issues to consider. Before every interview I informed the participants of who I was, of the goal of the research and the possible pros and cons of participating, followed by informing about the voluntary aspect of the interview and the right to stop the interview at any time. I chose to use a minidisk recorder during all the interviews, and would always ask for their approval of using this. None of the women saw the recorder as a problem. There were interviews where I could detect that the women were a little suspicious of what this study involved. In these cases I would be extra thorough in explaining the aim of the research. Confidentiality is an important condition for the conversation as a method, and I informed the informants that they had the right to be anonymous. All of the researchers and heads of migrant organisations complied to using their names, while many of the women did not wish their real names to be revealed in the thesis. I have therefore given the migrant women pseudonyms. The reason behind the women’s wish of anonymity may be that they feared reprisals should the thesis be published and read by state officials, employers or family. In this there was a difference between the younger and older women that I interviewed. The younger women talked more freely, while the older ones seemed more unsure about what to answer. Relating to this one may point to the difference in period the women grew up in the older women may have a stronger sense of the possible repercussions they would face. The interview situation is an unbalanced one, and the researcher has to

create an environment that invites to confidentiality. However, it is only the informant that shares her thoughts and experiences. Although the relationship between the researcher and the informant is characterised by the researcher steering the conversation, at the same time the researcher is dependent on the informant to be open and provide the information. The informant then has control over what she wishes to tell the researcher or not. This way both parties have the ability to affect the course of the interview. Qualitative research is a part of a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the informant. In this regard, both Kobayashi and Smith stress that qualitative investigations must be recognized as an intersubjective encounter whereby we and our research become part of people's lives (Kobayashi 2001, Smith 2001).

The aim of the interviews was to get information about how the women themselves apprehended their situation, what they felt was important in their life in Beijing. In my thesis I have been looking for perspectives on larger society-related questions in the informants' answers. Such questions one can find the answers to in other expressions and actions. It was my aim that the focus of the investigation would be established by the research subjects, and had therefore prepared some opening questions and some extra questions if necessary. I generally began by explaining that I wanted to hear the story of their lives, and in particular their experiences of migration and life in the city. These questions were directed at the women's background, aspects of their lives in Beijing, their membership in Migrant Women's Club, their relationship to other migrants or members, family and the government. In the interviews I tried to get an impression of their view of the state and how the membership at the Club affected their lives. Some women responded by talking at length and in these cases I intervened with very few questions. Others were less inclined to talk in any detail and in these interviews I asked questions more frequently. In the majority of the interviews with the migrant women the situation had the characterisation of a formal interview with questions and answers. However, in several interviews we got a good connection with the informant, and the situation bore more the shape of a real conversation. Some of the women even kept talking after we had finished the interview.

The majority of the researchers and chiefs of migrant organisations spoke English, but the most of the migrant women spoke only Mandarin. Mandarin is however a second

language to my informants, as it is for me. The women understand mandarin and quickly learn it upon arrival in Beijing, but in daily interactions they usually speak their local regional dialect. In formulating my questions in Mandarin I received help from my Australian friend, another Chinese friend and the research assistant. Where the language sometimes failed between us, it may be that my meaning got lost in translation or that the questions were affected by their view and background. At the time the questions were formulated however, as I mastered Chinese quite well and my friends spoke English well and the assistant understood Norwegian, I believe that the questions resembled what I intended. In situations where I lacked the necessary skills to express myself or understand their statements it could be hard to get direct contact with the informant. But it seemed like the women were impressed that I spoke Mandarin at all, and maybe the fact that I struggled more with the language than they did, earned me their sympathy and reduced the gap between us. During the interviews, in the instances where the informant did not understand my Mandarin, the research assistant stepped in and explained. Although she only assisted when confusion arose, the meaning of the expression may also here be lost in the translation, of both questions and answers. When the research assistant repeated the question to the informant, who then only turned to the research assistant when answering I felt more like an observer than a participant in the conversation. This does not necessarily have to be a problem as long as the interpreter gets a good connection with the informants. The research assistant became familiar with the topic after a while, and it was important to be open to other possibilities and directions than my initial questions, so along the way new questions were included. It could seem like the women were less nervous with having another migrant there, rather than being alone with the foreigner.

The interviews with the majority of researchers went on more like informal conversations, while a few were straightforward interviews. One may suggest that this largely depended on how they saw me as a person, their interest in the topic or talking about the theme to a foreigner. Concerning the interview with one researcher in particular, I got the feeling that he was more guessing the answers than actually knowing. This can be related to Chinese culture in that rather than saying that he did not have an answer for my question, he answered randomly to avoid losing face. On the other hand, this may be a misinterpretation by me not being familiar enough with the language and culture.

### **3.3.5 The researcher's position**

The information communicated through interviews are stories retold, which therefore are characterised by the informant's understanding of what she has experienced. Data from interviews can also be seen as shaped by how the informant experiences the researcher. The researcher's person, personality and appearance may affect the method and data material. Being young, foreign and educated may have affected how the women felt towards me in the interviews. They may also have produced answers according to what they thought I wanted to hear (Thagaard 1998). It is therefore important to try to avoid letting one's own opinions characterise the interview situation. However, I was conscious about such a possible consequence. Interacting with and talking to these women I felt humility and lacking knowledge compared to these women who experienced strong marginalisation in their lives and still kept fighting. It may be a possibility that the women saw a difference between us, but I did not get the impression that they saw me as better or stronger, rather they were curious about me and my background. Also, it may be that the women appreciated being listened to with empathy. Rural migrants commonly feel that in the city they are surrounded by people who believe themselves to be superior and treat them with contempt, and there is no one who will listen to them. In this case they had the opportunity to talk with someone who, despite their higher status, was empathetic and keen to hear their story. Migrant Women's Club have been subject to great interest by local and foreign journalists, academics and others. This can indicate that some of the members are used to an interview situation, and may have introduced the positive effects of communicating their stories. On the other hand, this can also involve a feeling of exploitation among the members, in that many visitors came, saw, wrote and never made contact again. In my case I feel that the women were generous and open in telling me their stories. They seemed to think it was exciting with a foreigner, and they were eager to help.

## **3.4 ANALYSING THE DATA**

Kvale suggests that when analysing an interview what is not said is often as important as what is said (Kvale 1997). Important methodological challenges are related to how the researcher analyses and interprets the social phenomenon under research (Thagaard 1998). Questions concerning representation, the role of the researcher and to what

extent interpretation is possible are issues highlighted when it comes to interpretation. How is it possible to produce knowledge from other people's stories and lives? There are also several issues related to losing information along the way, through the level of language skills, through taping the interviews and through the transcription. All of the interviews that were conducted, were transcribed by the research assistant. Transcription in general involves considering elements like reliability and validity. There exist a possibility that her interpretation of meaning have affected the transcriptions, and that she has a different perception of the answers and what makes out a valid transformation of oral to written form. I have to rely on her apprehension of the women's meaning. In this way the text is interpreted by her, which again is the basis for my interpretation. This may have affected the text and the basis for analysis. On the other hand she related to their situation and I see it has she has done a loyal transcription.

Earlier in this chapter I described the background and basis for the research and my choice of research method. The informants' answers will most often not be straightforward due to the risk connected with the answering such questions. In analysing the migrant women's answers I have therefore focused on the deeper, hidden or disguised meaning of their actions. I have seen their replies and actions as discourses that could reveal and make the social relations clearer. To support my findings I have also made great use of second hand literature. Due to the time and extent of the project this was a necessary mean to supplement the analysis, give a fuller picture of the material and to answer my research questions. To some degree I have compared the answers of the younger and the older group of women I interviewed. This was done to see if there existed differences in opinions and apprehensions, related to their generation. Throughout the thesis I have included several quotations from the migrant women, but kept their confidentiality. In using these statements I wish to underline how the women experience their situation, and to work against the discourses where the subaltern are so often presented as passive objects, unable to speak for themselves. Of course, these quotations do not give the reader access to the subaltern voices of the migrant women, for it was the research assistant that translated the text and I who selected them and placed them in the text in order to achieve particular effects. In many cases I chose these pieces because they seemed typical for or representative of the women's situation. Due to the researchers

background and connection to different scientific environments, the researchers interpretation will be from the outside, contrary to the informant's explanation of her situation from the inside. My presentation of my informant's opinions is still my interpretation, and the reader should have this in mind when reading the thesis.

## 4 Analysis

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I will show how the Chinese state through its use of power and power techniques shape public discourse. Further I will address how these power grips shape migrant women's environment, before I turn to look at how Migrant Women's Club offer an alternative identity and exemplifies the women's opposition and agency. The Chinese society has been, and still is subject to regulation and supervision by an authoritarian one-party state. Though the high-speed economic processes the last decades have changed the fabric of society in many ways, the government still tries to maintain its dominance. The millions of migrants entering bigger Chinese cities every year is a new source of worry for the state. Government officials and urban citizens fear of social unrest and pressure on urban public resources. To please the urban citizenry and control the migrant population the Chinese state has attempted to use different mechanisms. Subjected to these control techniques, migrant women in particular experience a truly marginalised everyday due to their rural background and gender. The poor, degrading circumstances migrant women live under in Beijing are not in accordance with those possibilities a human being should have to live a good life. Public discourses concerning migrants in general and migrant women in particular, lead to a continued marginalisation and a suppressed situation. Yet, the space of action for migrant women is highly limited, and acts of resistance difficult. There does however exist some options. The Migrant Women's Club stands as an alternative to the everyday world for the women, and give them the opportunity of empowerment. The story of migrant women in Beijing is one of oppression and suffering, but also one of courage and hope.

I will here look at two questions:

- *What characterises migrant women's situation?*
- *How do migrant women describe their own situation?*

From the perspective of domination and resistance migrant women's situation have two important characteristics. First, they are outsiders. As newcomers, and especially because their official status leave room for interpretation, they are easily exploited.



They have little leverage to make claims on public resources. Second, they are members of two worlds, and capable of being in this position. The first part of this chapter accordingly examines how the state enforces the outsider status on migrants, and how this domination has an effect on their everyday life in Beijing. The second part of the chapter describe how the women respond to state intervention and analyse how they resist such domination, in particular through their membership at the Migrant Women's Club.

### ***What characterises migrant women's situation?***

The migrant women's situation is thoroughly marginalised. In general the Chinese society is characterised by the lack of organisational freedom and freedom of speech, but other limitations also affect migrant women's life in Beijing. The women lack recognition from the central state, government officials and the urban citizenry for their membership in the urban society, and as humans with needs and possibilities and their equal contribution to men in society. These aspects make the lives of migrant women difficult, and make it hard to improve their own life situation.

In the following I address the public discourses concerning migrants and migrant women. I will further describe the direct implications of these discourses and state actions on migrant women's lives as examples of what they face in daily life.

## **4.1 MIGRANTS AND STATE CONTROL**

Categorising and naming are discursive practices inseparable from social power. "The labour of categorisation, of making things explicit and classifying them" (Bourdieu 1991:236) is a crucial mechanism for defining the meaning and order of the social world. Therefore, naming and categorising does not simply describe, reflect or represent social order, but also shapes and reshapes power relations among different groups. Up to the late 1970s the Chinese state tightly restricted population mobility through the *hukou* system. Prior to this period practically every function in the majority of Chinese citizen's lives was regulated through citizen's assigned rural or urban status. Within the *hukou* system births and deaths, marriages and funerals were registered, and resources like food, housing and work were allocated. Its

implementation in the 1950s made the *hukou* system the legal basis for Chinese citizenship and all individual and family identification and legal rights (Dutton 1998). The changes in the Chinese society the last 30 years have, however, reshaped the basis of the system. Many restrictions do not apply anymore, and researchers argue that the system has lost some of its importance since many of the regulations connected to it are removed (Gui, Wang, Tang, interviews 2007). With the dismantling of collective agriculture, the return to household farming and the revival of private marketing in the early 1980s, in connection with acute urban labour shortages, pressures from enterprising rural migrants gradually eroded the basis of the control mechanisms of the *hukou* system (Mallee 2003). Rural-urban migration exploded, a process of change often referred to as a ‘cork out of the bottle’ phenomenon. In this view decades of migration control had led to enormous pent-up urbanisation pressure (Mallee 2003). While not functioning as a mechanism for controlling migration anymore, the *hukou* system still remains crucial in differentially structuring life chances across the administrative divide of urban and rural residential categories. Discrimination of rural *hukou* holders is, through this system, institutionalised and justified. According to Chan (1996) it functions as an “internal passport system”, where migrants are treated as foreigners in their own country. The status of migrants in China can be compared to that of (illegal) immigrants in other countries (Windrow and Guha 2005). Yet, their status is not based on race, religion or national terms they are as Chinese as permanent urban citizens. The treatment migrants receive, on the other hand, corresponds to the often discriminating attitudes immigrants experience. To explain this suppression we can look to the power executed and the techniques employed by the Chinese state. Officially migrants are cast as different than urbanites, and discriminating attitudes will therefore be easier to adapt. Foucault (1980) outlined the mode of *scientific classification* to control people and make compliant objects. An assigned status put migrants in a particular category, different from the urban population. This contributes to suppressing the migrant group and indoctrinating their outsider-status. Different discourses as well, attached to the rural *hukou* category, contribute in this aspect.

#### 4.1.1 Public discourse

Migrants construct and perform their identities and understand their experiences both in reaction to and within the framework of dominant state and popular discourse in which they have been cast as a group that is in essential different from, and outside of, the urban citizenry. In order to understand migrant women's lives we need to understand the construction of migrant subjects in dominant discourses. Dominating the public discourse about migrants and migration is the urban/state perspective. The dichotomy rural/urban, corresponding to the categories of the *hukou* system, can be supplemented with attaching the state to the urban group. This attachment indicates that the relationship between the urban population and the state is much closer than between rural inhabitants and the state. The state's attention has through time been more directed towards the urban society than the rural. Previously, ruralities were expected to take care of themselves, to live off the land, while the urban *hukou* holders depended on the state for for example food. Now the basis of the *hukou* system has changed but urban citizens still have entitlements and still expect the government to fulfil their needs. Guarding their welfare provisions, the growing urban middle-class remains close to the state, and the state depend on their support and want to please the urban group. Their interests are co-joined, and give basis for an "us" versus "them" mentality. The highly political labelling game used by the government then, serves to identify migrants as outsiders, as a problem, *to put them in their proper place* (Mallee 2003). Relating to the studies of James Scott (1990), acts of description are politically loaded. Scott draws attention to euphemisms, and in this vein, the 1958 *hukou* regulations demand that migrants have a 'proper reason' for staying in the cities. The term *mingong*, today the most common designation for rural labour migrants, can be found as early as the regulations of the 1950s. *Mingong* are not 'full' workers, the term implies a lesser value than the term worker (*gongren*). *Mingong* cannot claim the superior 'worker' status. During the 1980s, this term, with all its implications, naturally fitted the newly emerging migrant population in the cities. Jia Zhiwei, head of the organisation Migrant Worker's Friend, refers to the notion of *mingong*, and the discriminating basis of the word. He thinks the concept itself elaborates the problems; "due to this way of cataloguing and classifying, more trouble comes along" (Jia, interview 2007). Migrants are also referred to as *mangliu*, 'blind vagrants', because they are seen as chaotic and disorderly. Another description involves migrants resembling a wave of people, *mingongchao*, and women in

particular have been characterised by officials as ‘excess birth guerillas’, which indicates that they do not conform to the official one-child policy. The foundation of this discourse is the dichotomy contained in the *hukou* system. Regardless of how long they have stayed in the city, rural migrants remain a distinct category and are accordingly identified as so in the daily speech.

General convictions among urbanites and government officials involve the attachment of certain attributes to these ‘migrant terms’, characterisations of migrants as lazy, stupid and dirty. With this apprehension of backwardness encoded in the term *mingong*, reified and essentialised during the Maoist era in the theory of the dual nature of the peasantry and the *hukou* system, and once more highlighted in post-Mao anxieties and desires about values and virtues, it is perhaps unsurprising that when large numbers of rural people began entering the cities in the mid-1980s they too should be viewed with contempt and distrust by urbanites. Terms like *mangliu* and *liudong renkou* (floating population), refer to the mobile aspect associated with migrants. People removed from their usual space are publicly viewed as unaccountable and hard to control. According to Zhang (2001), migrants are regarded as a serious social problem by urban officials and residents. The basic tenet that migrants pose a potential threat to public order remains a powerful undercurrent in the official discourse about labour mobility (Mallee 2003). Top leaders and city officials fear that the clustering of migrants in certain areas might imply fertile ground for mobilisation against the state. Another source of suspicion towards migrants can find basis in that the established have their own social structures and hierarchies (Ding and Stockman 1999). The relationship between the floating population and the residents therefore tends to be characterised by mutual suspicion, vigilance and isolation. Solinger (1996) has sketched out the range of such factors, distinguishing between factors relating to traits of the migrants themselves and those related to features of the receiving urban society. Among the latter she list the following: the class structure of the city, the pattern of property ownership, the type of labour market, the political system, patronage networks available to migrants, differences in access to the urban educational system, housing opportunities in the cities, and attitudes of the receiving community. Urbanities and the government view the “enormous” waves of ruralities pouring into the city as a threat to the existing urban infrastructure. Local governments in different cities in China see it as they have no time to expand the

services, however, do they have the will to do this? Gui Hua, sociology professor at Renmin University of China, claims that migrants are looked upon as a burdensome group who are responsible for a general reduction in the quality of the city life (Gui, interview 2007). They are seen as the cause of higher costs for the urban citizens and a competition for the resources that are already seen as sparse. Some perceptions involve that migrants residing in the cities will lead to competition for work, lack of housing, pressure on transport systems and water and electricity supplies, and have a negative effect on education and health services (Smith 2000). Yu Dapeng (1994) refers to this as the "riding the train effect" - those already on the train (in the city) resent the crowding caused by others (rural migrants) trying to get on. Inflation and higher crime rates are also easily linked to the entering of millions of migrants. Tang Can, researcher at China Academy of Social Sciences, underlines this and gives an example; "If there is a car stolen in a residential area, people will think directly that 'Oh, too many people from provinces' " (Tang, interview 2007). The *hukou* system bias urbanities' assumptions, perceptions and expectations in ways that prejudice the reception they accord outsiders. Many urban citizens see their privileges as a birthright, and expect to have their allotted share of the goods. But the transition in Chinese society causes old rules to wither and new standards and problems to arrive, at the same time as the arrival of migrants. Any fear or anxiety connected to a changing society is easy to blame on the "outsiders". The fear of outsiders, people who cannot be pinned down, can contribute to this group being easily cast as scapegoats. Such automatic, negative attachments to a group should be seen as opinions absorbed through the official representations, through public discourses. In the view of these so called dangers, the government is trying to stem the tide by upholding its discriminatory policies against rural-urban migrants embodied in the household registration system. On one hand the government wishes to unleash the economic forces motivating migration, but on the other they seek to preserve the status quo and the power that goes along with it (Scharping 1997). The government then performs a balancing act to keep up control of population movement. Attempts to channel rural migration away from the big cities and to prevent itinerant workers from becoming permanent migrants have characterised the official approach for a long time. However, in most cases newcomers are barely competing with citizens or interfering at all (Solinger 1999). Rather than competing with urban citizens for jobs,

they take the jobs the urban group does not want, and rather create more jobs with their demand for additional goods and services. Of course, migration problems are not unique to China. In many respects they are just a variation of a worldwide predicament that can be observed in other developing nations too.

Many researchers report of different descriptions concerning migrants' experiences of discrimination (Jacka 2006, Zhang 2001, Solinger 1999), and for some of the migrant women I interviewed the *hukou* system was seen as a source of unfair and unjust treatment (Liu, Li, interviews 2007). Yet, this perspective was not shared by all. Mrs. Min, from Sichuan province, now situated in the north eastern part of Beijing, worked in a factory producing heat insulators and took care of her two children as her husband had a job in another province. Mrs. Min described that she had not felt discrimination in Beijing, and the reasons for this, she claimed, were due to the 'true' ways of her actions; she worked and earned money like every other person, "*it is not a shame*" (Min, interview 2007). Referring to the term shame in relation to discrimination, Mrs. Min's expression was common for many of the migrant women. The discourses related to 'worker' values and 'female' values are highly evident in this matter. Through her story Mrs. Min described how she fulfilled the roles she perceived she was expected to; the role as a worker, and as a mother. Her expression of "*it is not a shame*" underlined her dedication; to her work because she obeyed her boss and worked overtime, not complaining about the danger with the materials she handled, and taking care of her mother-duties at home. The migrant status indicates that these women are expected to be grateful for being in the city and endure their life situation; because they are not educated they cannot expect a better job, and because they are women they are expected to be docile and passive. Mrs. Min saw her life as no shame because she lived according to the state and society's expectations. The migrant women see themselves as fulfilling their assigned subject positions, as a (migrant) worker and as a woman. In return they expect fair treatment, from the Chinese state and the urban society. Related to Scott's (1990) studies such compliant behaviour can also be seen as a strategy to improve their lives. They hope that by pleasing the power holders they will achieve good will from this dominating group. Other qualities are also connected to the female nature and expected in a Chinese woman.

#### 4.1.2 Values and virtues

Mao praised Chinese women announcing that they “hold up half the sky”, meaning that women are capable of taking part in building society, able to share the responsibilities and workload with men. However, in practice Chinese women did not achieve gender equality as the slogan implied (Wang 2003). Fan (2004) describes the slogan as summarising a Marxist version of feminism and the logic behind massive efforts to mobilise women to enter the labour force. With this hegemonic state feminist discourse the state drowned out women’s independent voices (Greenhalg 2001). In the traditional view an ideal woman should hold up more than half the sky. Such a perspective implies that a Chinese woman should not just be equal to the man but also inhabit female values and do the so called women work as well. In this regard, a notion that can be compared to this is the ‘double burden’-term. A “good” woman is thereof defined by what virtues she possesses. According to Barlow (1994b:345) the state discourse of the “imbricated national Chinese woman subject” is one that assumes that the interests of individual women and the interests of the state are one and the same. Women are expected to be independent, strong, confident and proud, and to be motivated, educated, to have a strong determination and goals (Gao 1999). Throughout modern history Chinese women have been fed images of the “model woman”. One can see such virtues pictured as necessary means to mould Chinese women into citizens who fit into the roles carved out by the state. How a woman possesses these virtues and moral purity is obvious in how one sees a ‘good’ woman. The official view of what being ‘good’ involves contributes to indoctrinating Chinese women and making them compliant objects. Anagost argues that:

The bestowal of status honors, through the issuing of ritual markers and public processions, demonstrates the power of the state to define discursive positions in political culture through its classificatory strategies, its power to name, to sort persons into the hierarchically arranged categories of a moral order (Anagost 1997:100)

For a migrant woman to be recognized as a woman on the same level as an urban woman, having ‘culture’ is highly important. In public discourse in China today, the combination of modernisation, development and being cultured has a strong symbolic value. In a high degree, this relates to the concept of *wenhua*. *Wenhua* can be translated as civilisation, culture and education. The lack of *wenhua* means uneducated or illiterate, but also indicates a lack of refinement and culture (Jacka

2006). The institutionalisation of this term in the Chinese society makes a huge impact on the lives of migrant women. The official discourse preaches that to climb the social ladder, to erase the distinction between rural and urban identity, the possession of ‘culture’ is of great relevance. In this way the term is connected to a sort of racism. The *hukou* system represents several barriers in this sense, among them that the possibilities for education for migrant women are limited. *Wenming* and *suzhi* fall in the same category as *wenhua*, the first translating to civilisation, culture or civility, while *suzhi* includes a range of attributes, abilities and qualities, ranging from education and civility to genetic quality, physical fitness and political correctness and self-confidence. Jacka (2006) claims that the key to understanding the significance of *suzhi* is to recognize the very utility and power of the term’s flexibility. Another important characterisation of the deployment of *suzhi* is that “it focuses concern on the attributes of human beings and how to improve them, and diverts attention away from deficiencies and inequities resulting from structures, institutions, and practices either created or endorsed by the state” (Jacka 2006:41). The Chinese state portrays *suzhi* as necessary for national development on the macro level (family planning, crackdowns of crime), an all-important goal in China’s competition with other nations for pride and power. For the Chinese individual’s self-development, raising their *suzhi* involves better diet and exercise, taking English classes and travel. Such goals have been internalised as powerful yearnings among ordinary people, including migrant women. The seeming hegemonic discourses concerning migrants and women contribute to the migrant women’s apprehension that they are not worthy of any help from the state, and make the basis for picturing any resistance hard. Lacking or lacking to achieve the qualities that are associated with being ‘good’, a woman loses status if she fails to acquire them. In this way she ends up outside the definition of a woman. Lacking an urban *hukou* status, migrants end up outside the definition of a Chinese citizen when residing in the city.

For migrant women there exist a sense of in-betweenness (Beynon 2004). This phenomenon suggests that unlike migrant men, migrant women do not have a certain and fixed home to return to, Chinese women are expected to marry and then be a part of their husband’s household. However, rural-urban migration has in many ways changed the “natural” pattern for rural women. Zhang’s (1999) studies suggest “more women than ever before have experienced a profound change in their lives with



respect to geographical and social mobility, this is especially the case for younger women”. This corresponds to my research: many of the women I interviewed would like to continue to stay in the city (Yi, Rui, Wu, Ru, Jing, interviews 2007). Reasons for this had basis in the lack of opportunities in the countryside (there are few jobs and many of the migrant women know nothing about farming), and the uncivilised nature of the life in their hometown. Some of the younger women explained that they did not want to get married at this time, they wanted to be free and experience exciting things in the city (Ru, Jing, interviews 2007). They also pictured that they did not want to marry a man from the countryside who did not know the urban life, which speaks clearly of how the public image of rural inhabitants are incorporated into migrants’ mindsets as well; they have learned to look down upon those who do not reside in urban societies. Within the group of migrants in cities there also exists a hierarchy, migrants are not a uniform entity. According to Tang (interview 2007) “even among garbage-gathering people there are differences in incomes, status and social layers. Some become bosses while others stay poor”. There are of course also differences in how the different women feel about discrimination, and in their sense of help from the state. While the migrant women do not feel they belong in the countryside, the official and popular opinions do not view them as members of the urban society either. Jacka (2006) sketches out that due to migrants’ ‘fluidity and liminality’, describing that they have left the countryside but are not yet true urbanites, they threaten the very distinction between “rural” and “urban” upon which the order maintaining both urban material privilege and notions of higher urban *suzhi* has been based. Migrants’ status as outsiders and their geographical mobility dominate the attitudes of urbanites who view such people with anxiety. Being used to the “fixed” place structure of the *hukou* system, rootedness is an important ideal in what constitutes a desirable, moral life (Zhang 2001). The mobility of migrant women, then, threatens in one way to erode feminine values since the traditional view is that a woman’s place is in the home. Another side of migration is the unpredictability. A majority of the migrant women characterise their lives as “unfixed” (Jian, Yue, Zhi interviews 2007). This description find basis in the uncertainty and unpredictability related to their children’s education; they may have to return to the village so they can pursue higher education, their housing conditions; the old neighbourhoods they live in may be demolished, and their work; they lack work

contracts and may be fired at any time. Such aspects of instability also shape and marginalise migrant women's lives.

## **4.2 THE EVERYDAY LIFE OF A MIGRANT WOMAN**

Rural-urban migration is a story of gradual erosion of state control over movement, and a context that privileges urban over rural residents. The main interface between migrants and the state is the local police station and the neighbourhood committee. Corbridge et. al (2005) claim that poor people's view of the state is shaped through the state's actions, whether it reaches out or not in certain areas. Certain aspects of the *hukou* system, public discourses and actions concerning migrant women have great implications on their everyday life in Beijing. I will look at education, housing and work as some of the specific contact points between migrants and the state and urban society.

### **4.2.1 "Public school won't take him" (Jian, interview 2007)**

The migration pattern of migrants in China is often viewed as circular; they migrate to the cities, spend a period there and then return to their hometown. The amount of time they spend in the cities, however, can range from a few months to several years, and in some cases (and more often among the younger generations) migrants decide to stay permanently in the city. Like most aspects of urban life in China the schooling system is based on *hukou* status. School facilities and funding levels are tied to the numbers of school-aged children with local registration. Expecting to spend many years in Beijing all of the migrant women with children I interviewed wished that their sons and daughters could attend the public schools there. The quarrel over resources between the central and local state is evident in this matter. According to Saich (2004) state regulation requires local authorities to provide education for all school-aged children. However urban local authorities have interpreted this as meaning only those with a residence permit and thus migrant children have to be excluded. As Wang describes, without an urban *hukou*, the children "legally speaking, were not there, they were not Chinese citizens" (Wang, interview 2007). There exists a general reluctance among local governments to assume the fiscal burden of educating migrant children. If children who lack an urban *hukou* are to attend public schools in Beijing their parents have to pay fees that exceed their income many times.

Although some of the women expressed that they would like their children to attend the public schools in Beijing, they do not have the financial resources to cover the expenses. However, besides the lack of financial means, the migrant women also referred to other reasons that prevented their children from attending public schools in Beijing.

Public schools may often be situated far from migrants' place of living, and migrant children can be subjected to discrimination due to their *hukou* status, appearance and language. Apart from high school entry fees, another huge problem is the system of the entrance exam for higher education (*gao kao*). The lack of a Beijing *hukou* forces migrant children to return to their hometown to take this exam. Having spent all of their school years in Beijing the test will be based on different books and knowledge than the curriculum in the area where their *hukou* registration is. Mrs. Liu relates to the situation for migrant children's education possibilities in Beijing. She has two children, but has left them with relatives in their hometown. She underlines that "it is a waste for these kids to stay in Beijing" (Liu, interview 2007). Mrs. Liu's story is typical for the migrant women I interviewed, and this was a hard topic to talk about for all of the mothers. Clearly, these women work to give their children more opportunities than what they themselves have been handed. However, attempts are prevented by state policies. Official discourse points out that rural people now have more opportunities to move, to make money (He, interview 2006). On the other hand, the state underlines that if they are not satisfied with the conditions in the city migrants can just return home to receive allocated benefits. Such rhetoric leaves migrant women in limbo between what they are allowed to expect from the state. That way the state ensures an acceptance of such a situation. Reality also includes for many migrants that it is not an alternative to leave their children in their hometown, as their children are too young, or that they have no relatives left to take care of them.

For the migrant children staying in Beijing with their parents other options have to surface. The changing nature of the migrant population, with a growing proportion of families, has led to the emergence of migrant 'work shed' schools (*gongpeng xuexiao*). When children of migrant workers were refused access to local schools, or required to pay very substantial fees, in many places, migrants set up their own schools, inviting teachers from their home areas. Migrant schools are basically funded

by migrant parents and NGOs, the state in practice offers little help (Han, interview 2007). Mallee (2003) describes that migrant schools began to appear from the early 1990s, only to be subjected to regular suppression by the authorities. But no sooner were schools closed down than they appeared again somewhere else. By the late 1990s the overall policy had changed from one of active opposition to a more ambiguous one that did not formally recognize the schools but allowed them to operate. Still the government forces migrant schools to disband due to the lack of quality of the school building, teachers and teaching material. In late September 2007 I was doing interviews at a migrant school in a migrant residential area in Haidian district, in the northwestern part of Beijing. I was told that a few weeks earlier 37 of the migrant schools in the area had been shut down. Evidently the schools were up and running again, because as one of the teachers said, the state did not automatically offer places in public schools when closing the migrant schools. Usually more than 1000 children attended those schools, apparently a number too large for the government to handle (Han, interview 2007). Currently, migrant children are allowed to enter public schools, but only if there is capacity and with payment of high fees. The most common solution is therefore to turn to migrant schools. The issues concerning the education of children of migrant workers illustrate how the state restricts the opportunity of education for poor people, and limits migrants' lives in Beijing. The barriers can be seen as grips to control the migrant population. Migrants and their children are outside the urban social system, a signal of their outsider status in the cities. Another example is how migrants are marginalised in relation to health issues.

#### **4.2.2 "Money is the key" (Liu, interview 2007)**

Since state funding for public health facilities, medications, and personnel continued into the reform era to be pegged to a planned level of urban populace per city, arrangements for the health care of unattached newcomers from the outside appeared to be out of the question to bureaucrats (Solinger 1999). When it comes to health migrants are not covered by any policy in the city, and the majority of this group does not have the financial means to see a doctor should they be hurt or sick, and often have to look past doctors' recommendation of for example surgery. The previously mentioned Mrs. Liu came alone to Beijing in 2000. She explains that she was in need

of an operation, but due to her financial situation she could not go through with the surgery.

”Because it costs a large sum of money I chose to let it be. I will see what will happen. In one word, I need money. To be honest, in this society, people cannot afford medical treatment. You see, we don't have social insurance, and there is no public spending on us. I have to pay the fee all by myself. If one is in good economic condition, it's fine. If not, one has to consider long-term consequences. Unless it's really serious, I will not go to hospital.” (Liu, interview 2007).

Mrs. Liu's story is not unique among migrants. Many of the women I talked to describe taking up loans or ignoring illness because of their lack of money. These examples demonstrate how poor people without urban *hukou* status have to manage without help from the government. Migrants get tied to moneylenders because they do not have anything in spare for unforeseen situations. By not offering any subsidised treatments to people lacking urban *hukou*, the state, instead of creating opportunities for the this group, marginalises and actively hinders their priorities. Other problems also relate to this marginalisation. Migrants' economic situation decides what type of hospital they can choose, and if they can afford to buy medical insurance. As Mrs. Liu points out; “money is the key” (Liu, interview 2007). Paying for a hospital visit may require a month's salary for a migrant. Migrants earn approximately 600 *yuan* a month, an amount that corresponds to the average stated by the migrant women when asked what they pay for seeing a doctor. Some may have to return to their village to receive treatment. However, at some public hospitals in specific urban areas there are so called “migrant sections” for people lacking urban *hukou* (Gui, interview 2007). These special sections offer cheaper services than public hospitals. They are however few in number which leaves the service pressured, and the travel expenses for the often long journeys are too costly for many migrants. Some migrant settlements have their own doctor, but these doctors may not be officially approved. But when it comes to their children's health, the migrant women cannot ignore the problems. One option is to send the child back to the village, which demands the help of relatives. On the other hand family members may not have the time or the means to attend to the child, which requires that the parent returns too. This issue implies problems for Chinese people in general, but is a specific feature of migrant's situation in the city and their lack of possibilities. For migrant women, lack of maternal health and family planning education and services, and the poor quality-medical facilities that they often resort to,

pose another threat to their health. Women with urban *hukou* receive these benefits, but in contrast, although the state is enormously concerned with the reproductive activities of migrants, the vast majority of employers and of residential committees does not consider it their duty to provide neither family planning education nor services to migrant women (Jacka 2006). The regulation and surveillance of migrant women in the regard of reproductive activities is particularly harsh and thorough, and may involve huge fines and deportation should they lack the necessary documentation (Jacka 2006). Fan (2004) argues that the one-child policy in particular legitimises the state's surveillance of women's bodies, invades their privacy and penalises fertility. Migrant women's lives in Beijing are marginalised through the lack of health related benefits. Arriving in Beijing, the options for a place to stay are also limited.

#### **4.2.3 “How can we migrant workers rent nice houses?” (Li, interview 2007)**

Migrants have diverse housing arrangements. Construction workers usually live on the work sites and industrial workers in dormitories provided by the factories. Domestic workers on the other hand often live in the homes of their employers, while people working in shops, restaurants and service workshops sleep in the workplace. Migrants often settle in areas with people from their hometown. Clustering in certain areas often serve the function of making life easier by providing ready access to information, employment, credit, and assistance in daily affairs, as well as mental comfort from contact with familiar people in a familiar language (Mallee 2003). In Beijing the majority of rural *hukou* holders that enter tend to cluster on the outskirts of the city. These areas are poor and the houses migrants inhabit are most often primitive and in bad condition. People with the same place of origin cluster together and establish shops, schools and restaurants. For the interview with Mrs. Min I was invited to her home. In a one-storey building we entered through the main door and walked down a completely dark hallway. There were about ten doors on each side, and inside the doors lived whole families, in one room, in one bed. Mrs. Min lived there with her son who was five and her daughter of ten. Her husband lived and worked in the Henan province and it was his work unit that had arranged for their housing in Beijing. In their apartment there was barely any light, just one big bed in which they all slept, one TV, and the air was full of dust or the like. Mrs. Min's housing arrangements are typical among migrants who lack urban *hukou*. Due to the social system, people who lack financial means are forced to choose the “second” best

options. This shows how people are subjected to a structural “outsider” status. Publicly this can be seen as a way of relegating people to the lower classes. Mrs. Min was content because “though the house is shabby, it is free” (Min, interview 2007). Prices are high in urban areas and due to the Olympics prices in Beijing have soared. The majority of decent housing is still state or enterprise owned, and the access is controlled by the possession of urban *hukou* (Smith 2000). People without urban *hukou* are often not allowed to buy or build property and are relegated to the outskirts of the cities where “shanty towns” have sprung up. Limiting migrant’s choices enables the state to control their whereabouts to some degree, and also secure to fulfil the wishes of the urban population. Some local governments have implemented housing projects where they build apartments with lower rents for migrants to live in. However, living in an apartment like this usually requires a contract, and most migrants either do not plan to stay in the city forever, or they cannot plan for that long a time since their situation depends entirely on the work they can get and the money they can earn. Migrants also try to save all the money they can, many choose to spend as little as possible and send most of it home, where the money can help them build a house after working in the city for a while. Living permanently in the city is not an option for every migrant as their life is structurally marginalised. Work is no exception.

#### **4.2.4 “It looks like cotton, but it is toxic” (Min, interview 2007)**

Before 2001 the *hukou* system had a great impact on migrants’ work possibilities in the cities. To protect their own citizens, the local urban governments issued rules concerning which occupations migrant workers were allowed to have and not. For example in Beijing rurally registered inhabitants were excluded from entering twenty specific work sectors, decided by the local government to protect the urban residents’ work opportunities (Zhang 2001). These restrictions led to a dual labour market. However, after 2001 the system changed. Recognizing migrant workers’ rights, the CCP issued a Document no. 1 which emphasised the equal treatment of migrant workers and entitled them to the same legal attention and offers as the local, urban labour force (Wang, interview 2007). The government has also been involved in issues relating to migrants getting their salary, and getting it on time. Still the salaries migrants receive are low, they often work without contract, can be fired at any time

and the working conditions are reported to be particularly harsh (Jacka and Gaetano 2004). One may claim that the state has ambivalent attitudes towards these treatments. Migrants have been an important factor in fulfilling the needs in the labour market. To stay attractive to foreign investments it is crucial for China to offer cheap labour and relaxed labour policies. The labour law is supposed to secure the Chinese individual's rights through a work contract. Many migrants however, are subject to ill treatment in the workplace, with long working hours as the standard norm. Ms. Mei from the Shandong province, depicted that she worked 12 hours a day, 7 days a week (Mei, interview 2007). Jacka describes that the *hukou* system is still

“a visible marker of difference and inequalities- inequalities that are exploited and perpetuated by local governments, employers, landlords, and others.” (Jacka 2006:98).

The institutionalised socio-cultural divisions and inequalities of the *hukou* system provide employers with a ready-made category of subjects whose inferior treatment is already socially sanctioned. With the official, constructed image of migrants, it is common to exploit this group. Migrants' vulnerability to such treatment has been compounded by failures in state power, in particular by the state's inability to put in place a legal structure that would curb the worst excesses of capitalist exploitation. The Labour Law is of little use to migrants however, because few employers provide contracts to their migrant employees, and without a contract it is difficult to use the law to seek justice (Jacka 2006). The majority of the migrant group also lack higher education and knowledge about their rights, and would not know how to pursue such cases. In many instances employers will use threats to discourage migrants from filing lawsuits. Migrant organisations, like Migrant Women's Club, can on the other hand be of assistance in such cases. For the local governments around China a conflict of interest will arise as they on the one hand try to protect migrants' rights, but on the other

“the local governments are dependant on these workplaces, and will do what they can to keep the businesses there. The local governments have their own considerations, they want to attract capital to develop their city/province.” (Gui, interview 2007).

Many of the women I interviewed worked at factories, dealing with toxic materials without proper protection. Ms. Ru and Ms. Jing, two girls in their early twenties, worked in an electric factory. These young women told me that they did not consider



their work safe. Every day they handled toxic chemicals, and they were conscious that it might do them harm. Mrs. Min, as previously introduced also worked at a factory. She showed us the red rash on her arm from handling glass fibre.

“I work in the factory and the factory produces heat insulators. The insulators are made of fibreglass. It looks like cotton, but it is toxic. It harms human beings. The factory is so dirty. The material can be toxic and the fibreglass cause tickles. Usually people don’t like to work there. I have now showered and changed clothes. If I don’t do this, for example when I finish a day’s job, dust and other stuff cover my whole body. But I don’t care much about the conditions. I need the money.” (Min, interview 2007).

Both these stories tell us that these women look past such conditions because of their lack of better opportunities. The subject positions they know offer only an attitude that accepts such conditions, and do not see an alternative. Gaetano and Jacka (2004:52) describe how young rural women’s choices in the urban job market are limited “by notions of gender-appropriate labour and by discriminatory policies that, alongside the hukou system, restrict migrant’s access to coveted state-sector jobs and certain occupations”. The jobs available to migrant women are in restaurants, factories, with cleaning companies, and as maids and nannies. These jobs are not viewed as the most satisfying work, they might be heavy, with little pay and no prestige and most migrants are in search of a better job (Li, Miao, Ru, Ming, interviews 2007). Some of the women, like Mrs. Miao, found it difficult to find anything but a part-time job, and generally their jobs do not generate enough income to meet basic needs (Li, interview 2007). Some women open their own small shops, alone or with their family. Zhang (2001) describes that one problematic notion in the Chinese official and intellectual discourse is the assumption that by participating in commercial activities rural migrant women will earn their own incomes and eventually attain independence and social equality with men. However, economic development is not necessarily a liberating force for all women. Although the women might be free of traditional male domination at home, they face a modern, institutionalised male domination at the work place. Here they may be subject to degrading comments in reference to their gender and sexual harassment, and in most instances they receive less payment than men. The view is that these “poor women” will accept lower pay and any working condition. In a society where the existence of urban-rural equality is present in almost every aspect of life, the tendency to patronize and discriminate is accepted and internated by urban employers. In many cases

employers will harass women for being pregnant, and not adjust the working conditions or allow them to take maternity leave. Due to the vast pool of cheap labour it is easy for employers to refuse to pay maternity leave or fire female workers when they become pregnant (Zhang 2002). Barry Li supports this view;

”Males have more certainty for working a long time in the company. But for the females; they may get married and have kids. They have to go back to their hometown to give birth, and that takes several months. When they leave, the boss employs other women to replace them.” (Li, interview 2007).

Despite different policies and laws aimed at protecting their rights and interests, migrant women have been pushed to the bottom of the social hierarchy in the process of urbanisation.

### ***Summing up***

Despite all the changes, the core of the *hukou* system remains unaltered. The division along rural-urban residence lines is less clear cut, but the Chinese society by and large can still be divided into a large ‘agricultural’ segment and a much smaller ‘non-agricultural’ one, and glaring differences remain in entitlements between the two. Positive adjustments of the *hukou* system have occurred, but they have been accompanied by exclusionary measures: large cities restrict migrant’s employment options; migrant schools continue to be the object of forced closures; and ‘repatriation’ campaigns periodically disrupt migrant lives. As a result of the *hukou* system and accompanying regulations, and forms of discrimination, exploitation and abuse, that feed of those regulations, migrant women are made to feel at once both ”out of place” and ”put in their place” (Jacka 2006). This implies a marginalisation and alienation of migrant women in the urban society, but at the same time being highly restricted, subordinated and assigned a certain allowed space to live in the city. The various representations of migrant woman construct her as a passive, docile and compliant subject. None of the representations adequately expresses her agency and subjectivity. The construction of stories about migrants can be seen as made to assist in the construction of party-state hegemony. After decades of reform, the authorities are still trying to come to grips with rural labour migration.

### ***How do migrant women describe their own situation?***

Migrant women's situation is characterised by the Chinese state's different power grips. As described in the previous part of the chapter, they suffer suppressing circumstances regarding their children's education, their housing and work situation. With basis in the *hukou* system and public discourses the everyday is challenging. But how do the migrant women apprehend and describe their situation? Do they comply to their assigned subject positions? Are such inflicted marginalisations and situations seen as natural and evident to migrant women? Related to Foucault's studies (1990) on subject formations subjects construct their identities on the basis of discourse. The discourse concerning migrants communicated by the Chinese government is, as we have seen, concentrated on the migrant group as uncultured, a threat to public resources and social peace, and hard to "pin down". However, people living in suppressed environments will according to Scott (1990) find ways to express themselves and resist such domination. The indoctrination of suppressing discourses, in addition to discourses of the values and virtues a migrant woman should possess, seem on first glance to have succeeded with the women I interviewed. However, these expressions belong to the public transcript, while the hidden transcript reveals veiled acts of resistance.

I claim that migrant women have found ways to make a space for themselves in Beijing and that they use strategies consciously to pursue this goal. In this paragraph I will first address how migrant women describe their own situation in order to show the connection between domination and resistance, before I turn to how these women resist the state intervention.

### **4.3 EATING BITTERNESS**

Experiencing excluding treatment and meeting prejudice in the everyday life affect migrant women's apprehension of themselves and their situation. How and why do migrant women cope with their marginalised situation? How do they not knuckle under? Despite all the hindrances to coming and staying in the city migrant women still make the journey and most of them decide to stay. In order to endure such a marginalised situation one would assume that it will take a strong persuasion. But

what factors lie behind that acceptance of their degrading treatment? In one respect migrant women see their situation in light of and according to the incorporated discourses. Due to their lack of *wenhua* and *suzhi*, and the strong position of the state, opposition is perceived as useless. In that sense they deal with the situation by rather reconciling with these aspects, and accept the appointed terms of life in order to survive. The migrant women describe their situation in terms of marginalisation, the state versus the individual and coping through “shutting down”.

## 4.4 MARGINALISATION

### 4.4.1 “We are the lowest group in society” (Miao, interview 2007)

The power of the post-Mao state, I have argued, is legitimated not only through administrative regulations and policies but also through cultural discourses. The state’s hegemony is constructed and consolidated through the “privileged”, “civilised” and “modern” urban population. A hierarchical relationship between the self (city) and the other (countryside) is formulated by repudiating the other of rural migrant women. This discursive regime confines migrant women to stigmatised and marginalised identities, affecting their participation in employment, education and in social relations in profound ways. Under an authoritarian rule one may point to the strength of incorporation of such suppressing discourses. The hegemonic character of these subject positions is expressed through how migrant women describe their situation. Among the rural migrant women the general sense was that their status was low. Their everyday experiences were clear evidence of their position in the Beijing society. Mrs. Miao apprehended migrant’s image as “already not good” (Miao, interview 2007). The subject formations available for migrant women are as described linked to negative associations. Mrs. Miao’s statement indicates an awareness of an existing image, in a high degree constructed through the urban/state perspective, which automatically give migrants a “bad” label. Her description was common for the majority of migrant women, and the sense of their outsider status in Beijing seemed especially incorporated. The strength and effectiveness of the state/urban discourse was evident. Beynon’s studies suggest that migrant women blame “their unequal treatment and inferior social status on the *hukou* system that excluded them from the city social networks and cast them as long-term sojourners” (Beynon 2004:141). My respondent’s apprehensions corresponded with these findings; through categorisation

of the *hukou* system, the differences in offers relating to the education system, housing and work, rural migrant women feel excluded from the urban society. By not possessing a Beijing-*hukou* they see it as if they will never be ‘real’ Beijing citizens.

Still, it is not only the correct *hukou* status that was perceived to indicate belongingness to the urban citizenry. The majority of migrant women talked of *wenhua* as an important attribute in this sense. A particular part of *wenhua* apprehended as vital to migrant women was the correct ways of communication. The ability to speak in public with articulateness and persuasiveness is what defines the expression “knowing how to talk” (*neng jianghua*). Rural inhabitants are believed not to inhabit this knowledge due to their lack of formal education and peasant life style in the countryside. Rural women in particular are understood to be unable to talk because traditionally they are supposed to rather “listen to others talk” (*tinghua*), meaning to be obedient rather than speak up for themselves (Jacka 2006). When asked why there were men present at a meeting which was to decide upon whether the office of the Migrant Women’s Club should move or not, Ms. Han replied that

“the Chinese concept of gender is that men are the ones who should do the representing, and that women do not need to express themselves. So even though we invite fairly equal numbers of men and women, more men will show up to voice their opinions.” (Han, interview 2007).

Education is a very important component of social status in China and undoubtedly my informants’ concern to explain the impact of poverty on their schooling stemmed in part from sensitivity about their lack of education relative to urbanites in general and to myself in particular. Apart from appearances, language, or dialect, is an important marker in the Chinese society. To be cultured involves mastering standard Chinese, mandarin (*putonghua*). Speaking their local dialect will “give them away” at once, making it easier to label them as rural citizens, peasants. For many women it was therefore significant to speak mandarin well. At the end of an interview, one of the women actually asked me if she could listen to the tape, in order to evaluate the level of her mandarin. While on one hand newcomers in different countries try to speak the local language to fit in and be accepted, the example of migrant women in Beijing constitutes another aspect. They are born Chinese, but still labelled second-class citizens through the rigid categorisation of the *hukou* system. To consider viewing migrants in another way the urban society demands that they attain urban,

modern abilities. The migrant women expressed wishes to achieve more *wenhua*, and perceived it as necessary to prosper in the city. *Wenhua* is for example related to getting a “good” job, which indicates working in an office. According to Lou et al. the barriers to landing such jobs are substantial and include “hukou-based discrimination, dialect-based discrimination, and lack of networks, knowledge, and skills” (Lou et al. 2004:224). Among others, Mrs. Li exemplified that she perceived attaining a better job was impossible without *wenhua*, while Mrs. Min explained that “because of my lack of education I cannot find well-paid jobs. It is tough for us uncultured people to survive in the city” (Min, interview 2007). Mrs. Min further talked about working and earning money in order to be able to send her daughter to school, so she could learn more and become cultured (Min, interview 2007). Organisations working for migrant’s rights also identify the need for *wenhua* to make it in the urban society. Jia Zhiwei, head of Migrant Worker’s Friend, addressed that migrant’s lack of courage in confronting the government or their boss is due to “the lack of cultural foundation” (Jia, interview 2007). Even one of the researchers that was interviewed referred to the reasons for migrants belonging to what she called the secondary labour market, as “their rural identity, identification, and their low social and human capital (Gui, interview 2007). This second-class label is also a term referred to by migrant women themselves. In relation to migrant schools Mrs. Jian claimed that such an option was “fine for us migrant people. This school is our second best choice, we are content with the current situation” (Jian, interview 2007). Further, regarding their relationship to the government and as an explanation for their situation in Beijing, my interview objects also repeatedly referred to *wenhua*. Their way of rationalising their challenging situation in Beijing was related to being worthy or not of receiving help. Mrs. Jian emphasised that she lacked education and qualifications for asking the government for help. She further described that “even if they offer a job, I cannot master it” (Jian, interview 2007). With Mrs. Miao it was the same reasons; she neither inhabited qualifications nor the capacity to receive support from the state. These descriptions all address how migrants are made to feel different from the urban citizenry, through the *hukou* system and correspondingly differentiating discourses. Both Mrs. Min and Mrs. Jian refer to a dichotomy of “us” and “them”. Migrant women downgrade their abilities on many levels and see themselves as inferior to urbanites. Jacka (2006) also found that migrant women almost never spoke of themselves as “locals” (*bendi ren*), “Beijing people” (*Beijing ren*), or “urbanites”

(*chengli ren*), but rather identified themselves as “peasants” (*nongmin*) or, when talking about their status and treatment in the city, as “outsiders” (*waidiren*). According to the women their identification card (*shenfen zheng*) proved that they were not urbanites. They regarded this booklet as identifying where they belonged and who they were. Mrs. Li even referred to her lack of capacity to answer one of my questions in a proper way (Li, interview 2007). The signals sent by the state are embodied in Mrs. Jian’s and Mrs. Min’s statements and give a clear indication on how rural migrant women see themselves in relation to the state and urban society. In many ways the expressions made by migrant women here illustrate the power of public discourse. According to the women *wenhua* is what determines their lives and what possibilities they have in life.

## 4.5 STATE VERSUS INDIVIDUAL

### 4.5.1 “Man should live by one’s own” (Min, interview 2007)

For the Chinese state, an institutionalisation of a notion like *wenhua* implies that subordinates will not oppose the government due to taking hegemonic discourse as natural and evident, in accordance with Gramsci and Laclau and Mouffe. It could be argued that living in the city reinforces rural women’s sense of identity as rural people. Migrant women’s identities are constructed in accordance with the label the Chinese state and the urban citizenry have given them. What the women have learned is that they have to adapt to and accept the situation in order to survive. It is considered useless to try to fight the strong Chinese government.

“I hope my kids are healthy and that they can earn a living on their own, that they are able to serve the people and the society. That’s my biggest hope. I don’t want them to make something big, but at least they have to learn to rely on themselves. In this way, they cannot be burden of the society.” (Min, interview 2007).

Public resistance is not an option for migrant women. They are to a high degree conscious of the repercussions such actions may bring. In their limited positions all they can do is follow the governments wishes and be compliant subjects. As Mrs. Min explains, she aims that neither she nor her children will be a burden to society, and that the best way is to rely on oneself. Her expression is a clear indication of the image of migrant workers that is incorporated in society. The basic position is that she is a burden to society, and that she has to make amends in order to remove herself

from this situation. The structures behind her suppressed life, the state's discriminating policies, are not considered as contributors in this matter. One woman for example claimed that it was her own fault that she did not have any education above junior school. It would be up to her to attain the needed education. According to Jacka (2006) these women rely on no one but themselves because they have learned that no relation is permanent. To be allowed to complain to the state about harassment or corruption, they feel that they have to be cultured, or have money. The Chinese society is most often seen as collective. However my research indicates a turn towards a greater importance of the individual. With the urban-rural divide made by the state, people from the rural areas were supposed to live off their land and manage on their own while the state provided city people with food, housing and so on. One might link this to the migrant women's feelings and expressions about managing on their own.

One example is the case of Mrs. Min. As I described in the previous chapter her living arrangements and work environment could be considered of very low standard. However, the woman who sat opposite me on her bed in her one-room apartment, with red rashes on her body, still expressed hope and optimism. But such an attitude is necessary for migrant women in Beijing. This is survival of the fittest. If you don't adjust to the conditions you will not manage the life there, you will not survive. Mrs. Min forfeited that she should take responsibility for her living standard, and advocated that the government instead should help those who are in need of help. She continued with saying that "I can work for living no matter how hard it is" (Min, interview 2007). The general opinion among the women resembles this statement. For this group the state is not an institution to turn to in times of need. According to Mrs. Liu the state feels distant, far away from her as an individual (Liu, interview 2007). Ms. Han, head of the Migrant Women's Club, claims that the reason migrant women come to Beijing is to earn money, "their expectation that the government should stretch out its hand is not so strong. They regard an ok job and steady salary as the main goal in life" (Han, interview 2007). In many ways it seemed that the women did not dare to rely on anyone but themselves. Ms. Wu, a 25 years old woman from the Hebei province, proclaimed that "of course I should take responsibility for myself. I don't think it's wise to rely on somebody else. In fact, the best way is that you take responsibility for yourself" (Wu, interview 2007). The women most often listed that



they arrived in Beijing with family or friends. But many of the women described that they did not have any friends in the city, that also relationships between migrants were characterised by suspicion. Living under an authoritarian rule, which through time has encouraged citizens to report on each other, it is also likely that this is still a current attitude. The women's expressions also resemble the lack of knowledge of their rights. The group of migrants I interviewed consisted of both older and younger women. It was in some sense possible to detect a difference in attitude among these two generations. While the majority of the older women rejected the idea of the state helping them, some of the younger women, although referring to their lack of capacity, voiced their wishes. Ms. Jing, 21 years old from the Hebei province, expected the government to

“offer services and education to migrant workers. We have to educate ourselves and win equality in the society. The government should do something. Migrant workers are a weak group. We don't have much power. Not like white collars, they earn a lot of money and live a good life. We don't have that capacity.” (Jing, interview 2007).

This may show that the younger generations in China are more aware of their rights, and in contrast to the older generations not as coloured by traditions and history. However, they are reconciled with the state's absence. I argue that such acceptance is a result of discourses and fear of getting involved with the state. The state is portrayed as a distant entity, which they have little knowledge about. Ms. Mei told me that she “choose to bear all the pressure. It costs much to get the government involved. No one would like to go and ask for help from the government” (Mei, interview 2007). Mrs. Liu said the government's policies were fine, it depended on one's personal ability if you wanted to improve your life. Seemingly the women accept that they live under poor conditions, their houses are old and often subject to demolition, their work is hard and pays little, and their children have to get the second-best education. Apart from that receiving help from the government is perceived as an act reserved for someone other than a migrant, they have over and over gotten the message that they should manage on their own. Such messages are communicated through different channels. However, being conscious of the fact that you will not receive any help, but depend on yourself, can contribute to make the situation easier. It is a defence mechanism in that not reaching for the state's help, make them lower their expectations and accept what they have, and that they cannot affect the situation. In

another way, this can be seen as a clear power mechanism from the government's side implanting such apprehensions relieve them from their responsibility and also secure compliancy from the migrant group.

#### **4.5.2 *Renming* – accepting one's own fate**

The official stands in China have revolved around making contributions in society for the best of the nation, improving oneself for the sake of development. The value known in Chinese as *renming*, accepting one's own faith, implies that one should follow the assigned path in order to serve the nation and society rather than burden it, make the best of one's situation and not give up. It indicates that it is up to the individual to shape her own future. In this way the state relieves itself from taking responsibility for migrants' lives in the cities. As Zhang (1999) argues, the value of *renming* is reinforced by the institutionalisation of the rigid urban-rural dichotomy of the *hukou* system. Migrant women are made to believe that since they lack education, the ability to speak properly or resemble an urban person, they are not entitled to make claims on urban provisions. They are rather perceived to make the best of their situation. Rural migrants are, through public discourse, made to believe that they are second-class citizens and not worthy of support from the government. As they are labelled as a "weak" group, and through other authoritarian grips, the state tries to ensure that this huge group of migrants remain powerless and do not oppose the state. In this respect migrants apprehend that they are not in position to control their situation, *mei banfa*. Their only option is to make the best of their situation. Different marginalisations contribute to the women's sense of having to knuckle under. Not only are their political and organisational freedoms limited, and as women they are expected to not speak up but to remain compliant, but the public discourses revolve around how they are not "real" urban citizens and not worthy of receiving support. Together this shapes the women's apprehension of their own situation. To deal with their situation an acceptance of their situation is necessary for survival, as well as closing their eyes for the unfairness. Accepting one's faith is one way of coping with a suppressed situation. Another is to shut down their feelings, go "numb".

## 4.6 COPING

### 4.6.1 “Now I feel nothing about it” (Fang, interview 2007)

Experiencing bad living and working conditions, lack of support concerning healthcare and “denied” access for their children into public schools, one would think that this would cause a rage among the migrant women. Citizens from countries with more privileges would definitely march in protest and claim their rights. But China is a different case. These women have been raised in the belief that they should not receive any kind of support from the government, and although they may have strong feelings about their situation, “to loose one’s temper” is frowned upon in the Chinese society. Self-control is an important part of your character. To cope with the situation it seems like the women interviewed have just shut down their emotions. This “numbness” makes them able to function. We can compare this to the “yo mama-games” from the slave period. All the evil that happened to the male slaves’ mothers, sisters and daughters got an outlet in the expressions, they let go of the aggression through this activity rather than loosing their temper with their master. If you did, you would be killed. The migrant women have no power over their situation, “mei banfa”.

“One day I was taking a break, I walked to DaHongMen instead of taking a bus, which would cost 4 Yuan. On the way I was stopped and asked for my documents. I hadn’t taken them with me. The employer kept all the documents. I asked him to call my employer. But he didn’t hear me. I was charged 100 Yuan at last and I felt extreme grief. I gruded paying 4 Yuan for the bus and ended up with a penalty of 100 Yuan. I felt they were crazy. This feeling faded gradually. Now I feel nothing about it.” (Fang, interview 2007).

One may point to that Mrs. Fang is suppressing the feeling of powerlessness when claiming that “now she feels nothing about it”. These migrant women have no possibility to change for example their living situation; a house in so bad shape they cannot protect their children from deceases, they have little chance to send their children to the public schools or to get them treated for illness in the best hospitals. In accordance with the concept of culture and categorising, they do not see themselves in a position to do anything. In relation to Scott’s (1990) studies, rather than blowing up and risking their lives by upsetting the government, they go numb.

Another aspect is that many of the migrant women claimed to be content with the situation. China’s current president, Hu Jintao, spoke at a conference in April this year

praising the reforms the country has gone through and the opening-up policies. He portrayed this as a choice China's 1,3 billion people had made, and also said

“the Chinese people are dedicated to the great cause of reform and opening-up, and will continue to build a society of initial prosperity in all respects and realise basic modernisation in China and contribute further to the noble cause of peace and development of mankind.” (China Daily April, 2008<sup>2</sup>).

Public discourses also revolve around the voluntary aspect of migration, the choice migrants make when moving to the city. Though they are not entitled to social welfare in the city, they can always return home to receive such services there. Leaving the village implied for the women that they made an individual choice to let go of a fixed life. This way they rationalise all the bad experiences related to the migration. The price is high for the opportunity of a better life, and one has to take all obstacles and opposition into account. It is a choice you take, and it is voluntary. It seems like the general apprehension among the women is that you have chanced to have a better life and you just have to face the bumps in the road and keep going to survive due to voluntary aspect of it. Many of the women see this migrant experience as something temporary, that they will do only for a short time. This can also be viewed as a reason for enduring the situation, since they know it will only be for a limited amount of time, a sacrifice that will have great benefits for themselves and/or their families.

The stories of these women, on how they see their situation, tell us about their reconciliation with these terms. Or in other words, they do not have any choice. The state is a much stronger entity than them as individuals, and the fear of repercussions prevent them from taking action as a group. Migrant women are taught to adjust to the subject positions given them through public discourse, but as Scott (1990) argues, thin and thick theories of false consciousness have failed to address that people do not consciously accept degrading situations.

## **4.7 AGENCY AND RESISTANCE**

The regulation of migrants contributes to this group's sense of liminality and marginal status in the city. The disciplinary power of the Chinese state seeks to make migrants conform to a subject position as “secondary” citizens. As outlined in the previous part

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<sup>2</sup> [http://chinadaily.cn/china/2008-04/12/content\\_6612266.htm](http://chinadaily.cn/china/2008-04/12/content_6612266.htm)

of this chapter, the migrant women experience their life as marginalised, with regards to the state as a non-actor, except when it comes to direct modes of control like clean-up campaigns and disbanding migrant schools, and as a situation they need to “shut down” from in order to survive. Their descriptions of their experiences with state (non-) actions and public discourse suggest on one level that they accept their situation. However, though it may seem as the women simply have internalised negative characterisations, one may also point to the aspect that in addition to this understanding of others’ objectifications. There is at the same time a degree of ambivalence about the characterisations, perhaps even a challenge against them. In his book “Weapons of the Weak, Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance”, Scott (1985) looks at the diverse strategies employed by members of peasant households to oppose the suppressing manners of landlords, traders, merchants and government officials. My purpose is to direct attention to forms of resistance where poorer people talk back to the state or advance their agendas for good governance, however in a disguised manner in order to avoid repercussions.

#### **4.7.1 “To control the throat of fate”**

“To control the throat of fate” (*zhuazhu mingyun de yanhou*) is a Chinese expression meaning to take control of one’s own life (Zhang 2001:131). As opposed to *renming* (accepting one’s own fate) this expression suggests the existence of an ability in people to shape their lives. It also indicates that individuals should take charge and make the best for themselves. Chinese culture proposes that your fate lies in your own hands, and in order to change your fate you should work hard (He, interview 2006). I argue that the migrant women’s expressions about their situation in Beijing suggest that they are active beings making conscious decisions to follow their own path. They are not passive victims. They make pragmatic choices and employ strategies to overcome the barriers in their life. Guifen Luo (2005) argues that rural women are using their agency to achieve various social functionings; to revolt the gender bias and to combat poverty. Using Max Weber’s term of social carrier, he claims that migrant female workers are one specific group of social carriers in China; shaping China’s social transformation. At the same time their social status is shaped by this process. Migrant women take control of their own lives by making the actual migration, by taking jobs and building social networks when attending Migrant Women’s Club. The women are using their agency to survive in the city, to help their children go to

school, and make a better life for themselves.

According to Xiong (2004) Chinese women's rights in marriage and family are still bound by the inequitable status of women and men. A woman's status is primarily granted to her by her family and her husband as a dependent. The ways a woman can gain status through the family is by bearing a son, pass on the status of a powerful father to a husband, through her husband's love or by marrying a powerful or wealthy man and thus raise her own social status (Xiong 2004). The status a woman gains through her own efforts – her knowledge, profession and income is something entirely different. Both urban and rural women can today attain an improved social status through employment. Working outside the home alters the status of rural women. By sending money back home she goes from an economic liability to a respected member of the family and is admired by other villagers. Although one can see migration in relation to structural causes behind lack of jobs and low income levels, the decision of migrating is an active choice made by the women. The majority of the women interviewed expressed that they wanted something more than the life in the countryside. Their wishes included more money and a more exciting life (Li, Mei, Jian, interviews 2007). Women have almost always moved at the time of marriage in China. However, Gilmartin and Tan (2002) address marriage migration, and how rural women voluntarily agree to travel thousands of miles away from their hometown for marriage in another village. They describe that many rural women enter into such migrations in order to improve their economic well-being. Their findings, however, state that the women's participation in these marriage migrations do not constitute a female agency, but rather contributes to reinforce male power within marriage relationships, when only relying on their roles as wives and mothers to effect their shift from poorer to richer regions.

The women I interviewed referred to the bigger opportunities in the city as reasons for migrating. Comparing her hometown in the Hebei province with Beijing, Ms. Wu explained to me that though she felt the pressure was high in Beijing, there were more chances than in the countryside. She saw it as her task to pursue these opportunities. "If you don't push yourself ahead, you cannot earn your daily bread" (Wu, interview 2007). Zhang's (1999) research illustrates that the greater mobility of rural women represents a battle gradually being won by women against patriarchal control over

their movement and state restrictions on their economic activities and social mobility. “In making this choice, rural women defy both the artificial boundaries which structurally separate urban and rural lives through the *hukou* system and traditional gender roles and expectations” (Zhang 1999:39). In his studies, Guifen (2005) found that in response to the lack of support from the formal social security system, the migrating-mother households developed their own new coping strategies. The dependent children and the elderly were left in the countryside. The grandparents, who had maintained partially their capacity to work, at least to the extent that they could take care of their grandchildren, were in charge of the grandchildren. The young migrating couples reciprocated by giving their parents financial support, other material help and promises of better support in the future. This was also the case for many of the migrant women with children I interviewed. The choice of migrating was for this group related to a generation ambition. To give their children more chances than what they themselves had received, they took, as described, the often difficult choice of leaving their children in their hometown. By going to Beijing and making a life for themselves there, these women challenge the narrow boundary which the state tries to fix around their lives and experiences, their natal village, the village which they will marry into and their structurally-designed rural identity with low status. In so doing, they are breaking through the limitations put upon them by men, tradition and the state (Zhang 1999).

Shaping their life in the city also involves making use of social networks to find a job, a place to live or a doctor. Fan’s (2004) studies suggest that social networks among migrants are also used to negotiate their labour conditions and social inferiority in urban areas. According to Wang (interview 2007) people associate themselves by their place of origin, as they rely on kinship and native place ties. Many of the women I interviewed indicated that they came to Beijing with a friend from their hometown (*laoxiang*), who helped them finding a place to live and a job. Jacka’s studies (2006) imply that migrant women’s ties with relatives and people from the same place of origin declined during the years in Beijing, and that personal connections (*guanxi*) with other migrants and Beijingers became correspondingly more important for finding improved accommodation and better jobs. Facing discrimination and official harassment many migrants seek comfort and protection in informal groups. The women I interviewed more often referred to having acquaintances rather than friends,

but if they had friends in Beijing they were from the same province as themselves. Some of the migrant women found it hard to trust people they did not know or that was not from the same area as themselves (Li, Fang, interviews 2007). This may find an explanation in the thorough surveillance of the Chinese population on every level in society, down to local neighbourhood committees. In times of trouble the majority of the women therefore described that they would try to find a solution themselves first, before turning to friends or relatives. As with the state many talked about that they had to rely on themselves and that they did not want to bother other people. Ms. Wu explained that she would see if she could tackle the problem herself first. “I will push myself to make a way out. If I fail on my own, I will turn to friends who might help me out (Wu, interview 2007). The consisting statements about relying on themselves cannot only be looked upon as a way of keeping their head above water. Since they know that they cannot expect any help from the government, urban society or other migrants who most often are in the same situation as themselves, it is also an expression that shows agency and independence. Although there existed a suspicion towards strangers, it was clear that the women would turn to fellow migrants rather than urban citizens or the state. Where some felt they could not trust people and the majority wanted to rely on themselves when they were in need of support, the Migrant Women’s Club were often mentioned as a place they went to relax, feel “warm” and get help. The Club advertises its activities through different channels; a magazine, word of mouth and by visiting so called migrant areas in Beijing. Migrant Women’s Club makes an effort of making the Club known, but the decision to attend the Club’s activities or turn to them for help is a choice made by the women themselves. Their membership at the Club can be seen as an act of resistance, the hidden transcript where they vent their feelings towards the state and its policies.

#### **4.7.2 Migrant Women’s Club**

Opposed to the labels put on migrant women through public discourse, the Migrant Women’s Club contributes to different subject positions for the women. Some of the women regard the Migrant Women’s club as an answer to all their problems.

“Some migrant workers regard the Club as an organisation that can deal with everything and solve every problem. They don't realise that a part of the responsibility should lie on the government, police and court. They think that once we take their case, we must help them through. We orientate them that we would like to do what we can, and assist the government



to help. But migrant workers should grow up in many aspects. We are an assist force.” (Han, interview 2007).

One can discuss what role the Migrant Women’s Club plays in the lives of migrant women. Having close relations to the state do imply a conditional autonomy as the state have the possibility to sanction their activities. However, the Migrant Women’s Club is essential in the matter as they provide alternative subject positions for migrant women, alternatives to the official discourse on migrants in the direction of an empowered and active agent.

### *Modern and cultured*

The Club is a place for comfort and support, but the activities here are also tools for the women to achieve more *wenhua*. The people working at the Club (usually migrants themselves) assist the women with different practical problems and the members help each other. They organise courses to help migrant women master Mandarin and computer training, in addition to activities that focus on confidence to help the women feel good about them selves and to create a good group feeling. The women attending the activities are in all ages, married and single, from different provinces, and they got information about the Club through friends or through the leaflets handed out in their area.

The women I have interviewed were women that attended the Club’s computer course. The Club has offered this service since 1999, and they are now holding three courses at once, both in afternoons and evenings. After Microsoft donated 10 notebook computers to them, which are small and portable, they can also hold the courses in residential areas and make the access of the course easier for women for whom the travel to the Club’s offices is too far and time demanding. Han Huimin, chief of the Migrant Women’s Club, explains that they saw the need for a course like this, and that

“The computer course is from the beginning what migrant workers need the most. Mastering a computer show that they are involved in the modernisation in the cities and this can definitely make them more confident and close to more information. Whether they need computer skills in their work or not, it marks their entering into cities. It is a symbol.” (Han, interview 2007).

To acquire computer skills is viewed by migrant women as a way of becoming more cultured, and an important aspect of being modern and urban. Many of the women mentioned that they came to the computer course because it was free, and because they felt that it was important to know computers nowadays. "I am new to computers. Nowadays is the time of computers. I am free so I decided to come here, at least to know what a computer is" (Zhi, interview 2007). Migrant Women's Club fronts the computer course by relating it to finding a job and being a part of the urban society, and Mrs. Zhang (interview 2007) outlined that the computer course "is good for expanding my knowledge and the way of thinking". Acquiring such modern knowledge contributes to raising the women's confidence. According to Han Huimin the importance of the computer course to the migrant women lies in the access to information and knowledge. "They regard computer skills as important living skills. We create chances for those who have never touched a computer, we let them get a general sense of it. In the future when they have computers themselves, they can use them for searching information" (Han, interview 2007). To convince migrant women that they are more and can be more than their assigned status, is possible due to that they are conscious of the injustice in their situation. Through their membership at the Club migrant women achieve a different view of themselves that in turn enables them to resist the dominant discourses characterising their life. At the Club they get the courage to speak up for themselves, and the Club itself is a space where they can vent their feelings.

*"To join the Club was like finding my second home in Beijing"* (Rui, interview 2007) The Club acts as a space for migrant women to "withdraw and regroup" and from there they can begin to "invent and circulate counter discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser 1999). Coming to a new place and a city as big and unknown for many as Beijing can be intimidating. In a situation like this the comfort of being with people in the same situation is important. Established to help migrant women, with legal and financial issues, to adjust to life in the city, to help them develop, the Club makes out an important factor in the lives of these women in Beijing.

Reasons for coming to the Club varied from getting help with legal issues to learn how to manage a computer, but common for all of them were to come here to find a

familiar place, to share their experiences with people in the same situation, with the same problems, prevent loneliness and to seek warmth and comfort. “If I meet some trouble I can come here, they can share the worry with me” (Mei, interview 2007). When organisers chose the name “Home for Workings Sisters” (*Dagongmei zhi Jia*) for the Migrant Women’s Club, they no doubt had in mind an image of a “home” or “family” (*jia*) as a haven from alienation, hardship, and struggle; a place of reassurance, community and harmony. The common comment from the women I interviewed was that they regarded the Club as a second home. Mrs. Rui, a recently married, smiling young woman of 24 from the Yunnan province, talked about feeling at ease at the Club, and referred to attending the Club as being home.

“To join the Club is like finding my second home in Beijing. The homesickness is not so strong. Every time I visit the Club I meet open, nice people. So I love to be here. Whenever I have time, I come here” (Rui, interview 2007).

Through public discourse migrant women are portrayed as victims, but Migrant Women’s Club’s focus on activities that centre on the women’s capabilities contributes to a more empowered identity for the women. The Club has a great focus on building up the women’s confidence, on making them believe in themselves and feel comfortable in the urban society. With the Club seeing their potential, the women themselves will learn to see what capacities they have and how they can use this potential. Ms. Wu, 25 years old from the Hebei province, explained that at the Club she learned to be strong. Mrs. Rui described that “their good habits teach me to be thrifty, careful and confident. To be confident whenever I face things” (Rui, interview 2007). Raising the women’s self-esteem is an important part of making space for rural women in Beijing. Mrs. Rui described the Migrant Women’s club as

“a platform where you can perform as you wish and not be ashamed. I feel I am free here. I can do what I want and say what I want to say, I can even dance.” (Rui, interview 2007).

The extent to which the Club offers alternative subject positions are evident is this matter. By achieving more confidence and relating themselves to more positive identities the women find the courage to vent their feelings at the Club. “I experience so much here. As a migrant worker, I feel lonely. Once I come here, I feel I find home again. It involves very harmonious, nice relations that make me happy. I can release

my bad feelings here as well” (Liu, interview 2007). The Club becomes a space for reacting against their unjust situation. In this relation the Club functions as a space for the hidden transcript.

#### 4.7.3 Speaking bitterness

To eat bitterness (*chi ku*) means to endure hardship and suffering (Jacka 2006). The hardship and humiliation are considered necessary evils, positive contributions to their own self-development as well as to the development of the nation. Jacka (2006) claims that this is testimony to the power of the discourse on self-development, a discourse that has been crucial to the Chinese state’s promotion of capitalist development in this period. At the same time, the darker realities of migrant’s lives have become the focus for increasing levels of discontent and protest. Migrants’ narratives try to fit the frame but sometimes break out with complaints. Jacka argues that migrant women’s narratives of protest share similarities with, and are historically connected to a Maoist practice called “speaking bitterness” (*su ku*) (Jacka 1998:59-64). This term originally referred to a type of public performance practiced during the land reform campaigns of the 1930s and 1940s. During *su ku* sessions, individual villagers, encouraged and guided by CP officials, would step out into a public forum and give an account of the suffering they had endured at the hands of their landlords. Through listening to, and themselves enacting these highly emotional performances, villagers learned to publicly voice their suffering. Not in terms of unlucky fate or personal shortcomings, but in terms of an unjust and oppressive feudal system. This was a kind of consciousness raised and a means of interpolation. A way of educating people to think in terms of Marxist categories of class and exploitation and by making them active and enthusiastic agents of revolution. Later, this performance of protest was institutionalised further in the rituals of the struggle session which reached its greatest prominence during the Cultural Revolution. Migrant women have learned the same way to speak their bitterness against exploitation, and the rural/urban differences. The language they use can be seen as a window of their consciousness. At the Club they have the chance to vent their complaints to someone who is interested and takes them seriously. *Su ku* enables the participant to assert their own worthiness as human beings, established as the converse of the immorality of those they are denouncing. In the process of *su ku* against an oppressive “them” they construct an

“us”, and identify themselves not as lonely individuals, but as belonging to a community, albeit an exploited, subaltern one. Though they do not create a platform from which they can move from complaint to collective resistance against the state or status quo (rather, there was a sense that power was so overwhelmingly stacked against them that there was nothing they could do to improve their situation), when speaking bitterness they resist dominant discourse, and explicitly complain about the status quo.

“According to the dominant discourse of the post-Mao era, only intellectuals and urbanities are privileged with the agency and the ability to assert their autonomy free from state control. Ruralites, in such a discourse, are docile, passive, and dependent country bumpkins, still ignorant of how to voice their individual freedom through liberating consumption practices” (Zheng 2004:87).

Migrant women are through public discourse either portrayed as victims in need of rescue, or individuals that need to be controlled. A migrant woman is in the first case an object that urban middle-class citizens sympathise with and which do not pose any threat against this group’s relative comfort and superiority. In the other she is considered moving outside the allowed boundaries of the state, both concerning *hukou* status and gender roles. I argue that migrant women oppose such discourses consciously. Their statements about their everyday lives in Beijing reveal the feeling of powerlessness and bitterness towards the state and urban society, and although their expressions indicate that they look down upon themselves, their descriptions show that they are conscious about the negative review, and correspondingly this shows ambivalence to such attitudes. By talking about the bitterness regarding their housing and work situation and the frustration over their children’s access to education in the city they challenge the dominant discourse. In my view this shows that they do not accept their current situation. In relation to Sen and Nussbaum’s theories the migrant women organise among others because they seek greater control over their life- through the sense of belonging with the other women and within the frames of what they see as their culture. They don’t need to be told that they don’t like to be pushed around or to live in a condition of helplessness.

The dominating discourse about migrant women’s life does limit their space of action and their view of their own abilities and opportunities. The women have been taught

that they must inhabit certain values and qualities to be recognized as good women, that they can only see themselves through the subject positions constructed by the state. They are not used to seeing any other alternative. The importance lies in showing the falsehood in these discourses and creating an alternative one. The Club's activities, and how it works and expresses itself, are actions that imply that they do not accept the discourses concerning migrant women. Migrant Women's Club offers an alternative identity that presents gender and status in another way. By speaking their bitterness the women resist their marginalised life in Beijing and they make their own space. The every day resistance of the migrant women involves their membership at the Migrant Women's Club and their expressions in this space. Corbridge et al. (2005) suggests that these forms of resistance often take shape in reference to the different sightings of the state. The migrant women apprehend the state through their actions or lack of actions related to migrant's situation in Beijing. The state is challenged every day in small acts of resistance that people deploy against government officials or systems of rule. In this regard my studies exhibit examples of James Scott's (1985) theory; the meeting not kept, the fine not paid, the form of address refused. All of these small actions can help poorer people to maintain a sense of dignity and self-worth in the face of aggressive and overbearing officialdom (Corbridge 2005). The asymmetric power relation between migrant women and the state are one of superior state power. The state sets the standard for rules and norms directing migrant women's lives. However, through their agency migrant women also affect the power structure and demand their citizenship and space in Beijing.

### ***Summing up***

In the case of migrant women the theories of false consciousness fall through. I claim that these women resist the state's suppressing modes. Living under an authoritarian rule in a suppressed society, this resistance is performed "behind the scenes".

Expressions of discontent can be found in the hidden transcript. When migrants face representatives of the state and the established population, they usually rely on 'invisible' resistance, yield or attempt to take refuge elsewhere in order to weather the storm (Mallee 2003). Open conflicts have occurred, but are relatively rare. Although the migrant woman is considered a subject without a voice, or with a voice that is largely un-heard, there does exist a discursive space. In the case of migrant women the apprehended safe sphere of the Migrant Women's Club is a stage for such critical

voices. By making use of this discursive space and through living and working in the city, the women make a space for themselves and challenge the boundaries of the *hukou* categories and public discourse.

## 5 Conclusion

The lives of migrant women tell us the story about a Chinese society characterised by enormous changes and differences. These descriptions are important because they give an insight in the everyday of marginalised people, living under an authoritarian rule. China has focused on a new economic direction, but at the same time the state has wished to retain its power and control over the population. Contrary to this, my study shows that subordinates can and will resist the domination of power holders.

My aim with this thesis was to look at power and resistance in the relationship between migrant women in Beijing and the Chinese state. The point of departure was the two research questions I posed in the introduction. Throughout the study I have presented theory, method and data that give a basis for answering these; what characterises migrant women's situation, and how migrant women describe their own situation. In this last part of the thesis I will further discuss my findings.

### ***5.1 Characterisations of migrant women's situation***

The first question I posed in the introduction of this thesis was: What characterises migrant women's situation? In order to answer this question I have described and discussed migrants and state control, and aspects of the everyday life of migrant women.

#### **5.1.2 Marginalisations: State policies and public discourse**

The lives of migrant women are characterised by huge structural barriers and negative representation in public and popular discourses. Despite the altered conditions of the *hukou* system the Chinese state still intends to control the population with a tight grip, and the *hukou* system still has a great impact on the lives of migrant women in Beijing. When it comes to housing, health, work and children's education there continues to be large differences in the offers urban *hukou* holders receive and the services rural *hukou* holders situated outside their hometown are offered. The majority of my informants lived on the outskirts of Beijing, in old and worn down houses that could be subject to demolition at any time. The insecurity of not knowing what the



next day would bring also characterises their job and health situation. Migrants often work without a contract, and face the possibility to be laid off on short notice. As the majority lack private health insurance they risk large hospital bills should they themselves or someone in their family become ill. While their life in their hometown could offer some sense of security in a fixed house, job, doctor and education, migrant women's life in Beijing can be characterised as unfixed. The social stratification of the *hukou* system sends out a clear message from the Chinese government to the population about the gap in status between urbanites and ruralities and the second class-ness of the latter one. Migrants are through public discourse labelled as dirty, dishonest, 'waves' of people that put pressure on urban public services. This group is also considered a source of unrest and the government fear the potential revolt should migrants organise. Certain values and virtues are expected of Chinese women, which are also manifested through public discourse. "Culture" is considered essential for becoming one of "them"; the urban citizens. Migrant women in particular are represented as "birth guerrillas" when it comes to family planning, and as passive, docile and compliant subjects. Lacking female or modern characteristics, or an urban *hukou* status, migrant women end up outside the definition of a woman and of a Chinese citizen. In this marginalised environment migrant women try to make a life for themselves and their families in Beijing. Although their efforts are hindered by state policies and public discourse, discrimination, being given a certain space to live in, I argue that the women show agency in their stories and actions, and by this oppose the oppression on a certain level.

## ***5.2 Migrant women's descriptions of their own situation***

My second focus of this thesis concentrated around the migrant women's own accounts of their life in Beijing, and I asked: How do migrant women describe their own situation? The answers for this question I have found through discussing the notion of eating bitterness, marginalisation through public discourse, the relationship between the Chinese state and individual and numbness as a coping strategy. I have further explored the migrant women's acts of resistance.

### **5.2.1 The individual**

As outlined in the second part of the analysis migrant women's stories portray their feelings of reconciliation with the terms of their situation. Their descriptions revolve around how they themselves should change their fate, that they are not worthy of help from the state due to their lack of culture and that their situation is bare-able. I argue that people, despite their backgrounds, do not accept degrading conditions without feeling resent, and that they inhabit a will to oppose a suppressing regime. The Chinese state has through time established a fear in the society of the repercussions citizens that take part in uprisings may face. For migrant women a public protest is not an option. However, the women's descriptions speak of a feeling of an unfair treatment, and I find that they their membership at the Migrant Women's Club witness of their agency.

### **5.2.2 Agency and resistance: Making space**

Migrant women should be seen as agents who actively make an effort to change and improve their life in Beijing. They manage to create a life for themselves in the city, despite all the limitations enforced on them by the urban society and the government. By joining Migrant Women's Club my informants sought help and comfort. Although they do not voice their protests against the Chinese state publicly, they make use of more subtle ways of expressing their displeasure. The migrant women turn to hidden and veiled ways of protesting, and use the discursive space that exists within the Club as a stage for critique. Following Scott I find that everyday resistance do make a difference in society. In power relations there exist spaces of freedom and subordinates actively and consciously employ strategies to resist domination. I argue that by making use of this space, and also by their mere presence by living and working in Beijing, the women challenge the boundaries put upon them by the government and urban society. The control over mobility has loosened the last decades but as that the Chinese state wishes to maintain the tight control over the population the government finds other ways to employ modes of control. On the other hand, as migrants have found their own mode of urban life, they alter the rules of the socio-economy as much as it alters them. Migrants are important shapers in the changing Chinese society and will in turn affect the state itself. Migrant Women's Club offers migrant women support on different levels, through legal aid, acquiring computer skills, activities that focus on their self-esteem and self-worth and a place of

safety and comfort. I find that this support enables migrant women to better see their opportunities and how to pursue them. The Club contributes to empower migrant women. A theme for another study may be how the empowerment through the Club affects their relationship to their families. Through the Migrant Women's Club migrant women take on alternative identities and are empowered to pursue a better life. The women describe the Club as a second home and a place where they can relax and feel free. The activities at the Club can be seen as a way to self-help, which later can have an effect on their position in the Chinese society. The importance lies in how the women see themselves – as strong, empowered women – which in turn can affect and change their relationship to their husband, family, employer and the state. The Club makes an effort to reach as many migrant women as possible, but are also reliant on resources to cover the need. However, knowing that there exist such an offer can in itself feel like relief and hope for many migrant women. As the women experience raised self-esteem and empowerment through the Club it can be seen as a way of surviving, claiming their rights and taking a step towards a better life in Beijing.

In this thesis I have addressed the theme of power and resistance in the Chinese society, and the relationship between migrant women and the state. Through my study I have shown that also in environments characterised by an authoritarian rule and limitations in the freedom of individuals, resistance will occur, albeit in a concealed way. As this thesis is being finished the conditions around the Beijing Olympics stands as an example of the situation for Chinese citizens in general and migrants. As a show case for the rest of the world to see and admire, the Chinese government went far in giving a glorified picture of the country and its people. But behind the scenes stories of deportation of homeless and prostitutes, labour camps for critics, demolition of people's houses without compensation and exploitation of migrants and other groups reached the surface. An idea for future research may be to look at if the Olympics have made a difference for migrants and migrant women in particular. At one level China is taking steps towards development in areas concerning human rights and measures to improve migrant's situation and reforming the *hukou* system. On another level, when it comes to social welfare and security migrant workers have to depend on themselves for many years to come. The government does not ignore the need for improvement and understands the situation they may face should the large group of migrants mobilise. To secure its power and prevent resistance, the Chinese

state continues to uphold a strong grip on the Chinese society.

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# Appendix 1

## INFORMANTS

### **Migrant Women's Club**

**Mrs. Li:** 39 year old woman from Henan province. She had arrived in Beijing less than a year ago with her husband and two children, and worked part-time with cleaning.

**Ms. Yi:** 24 years old and from Shandong province. Yi had already been in Beijing seven years, and arrived there with her cousin. She now worked at the Migrant Women's Club.

**Mrs. Miao:** She was a 34 year old woman originally from the province of Hebei. For more than 10 years she had lived in Beijing with her husband and two children. Mrs. Miao worked part-time with cleaning and was a recent member of the Migrant Women's Club.

**Mrs. Zhi:** 28 years old from Shanxi province. She was married with one child, and was unemployed.

**Ms. Mei:** A woman in her twenties, originally from Shandong province. For more than a year she had lived in Beijing, and had previously worked within the cleaning business and at a factory. She was now unemployed.

**Mrs. Rui:** 24 years old from Yunnan province. She came to Beijing with 60 other girls from her area, and had married recently. Mrs. Rui was unemployed, but had previously worked with housekeeping and telephone sales. Her husband held a job at the Migrant Women's Club.

**Mrs. Yue:** 29 years old from Hebei province. She had been in Beijing six years, was married with a child and unemployed for the moment. Her last job was in the clothing industry.

**Mrs. Jian:** 36 year old woman who worked as a chef. Her place of origin is Shandong province, and she had stayed in Beijing with her family in Beijing for five years.

**Mrs. Fang:** She was a 46 year old woman from Zhejiang province who had spent 16 years in Beijing. On her own she ran a small tea stall.

**Ms. Wu:** 25 year old woman from Hebei province. She had only been in Beijing for three months, had previously worked with gardening and was now an intern at the Migrant Women's Club.

**Ms. Zhang:** 36 year old woman from Anhui province. Mrs. Zhang had arrived in Beijing one year ago and now worked at Migrant Women's Club.

**Mrs. Liu:** Mrs. Liu was 37 years old and from Anhui province. She had been in Beijing for 7 years, and now worked with selling insurances.

## **MIGRANT WORKER'S FRIEND**

**Mrs. Min:** 37 year old woman from Sichuan province. For 1,5 years she had lived in Beijing with her two children. Her husband lived and worked in another province in China. Mrs. Min worked in a factory that produced heat insulators and attended the activities of the organisation Migrant Worker's Friend.

**Ms. Ru:** 20 year old and from Hebei province. Her stay in Beijing had lasted for three years and she worked at an electrical factory. Ms. Ru attended the activities of Migrant Worker's Friend.

**Ms. Jing:** 21 year old woman from Hebei province who came alone to Beijing and had stayed there for three years. She also worked in an electrical factory and attended the activities of Migrant Worker's Friend.

I also had an informal conversation with a teacher at a migrant school in Haidian district, in the north western part of Beijing.

## **MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS**

**He Zhenglun:** Former Vice Secretary General at Beijing Cultural Development Centre for Rural Women. Mr. He helped me with the contact with Migrant Women's Club and other potential interview objects.

**Han Huimin:** Chief at the Migrant Women's Club. Ms. Han had worked at the Club the past five years, and had a big part in helping me finding women to interview.

**Li Tao:** founder of the migrant organisation Facilitator. Li had previously been the chief of Migrant Women's Club and engaged in the work with their magazine Rural Women.

**Jia Zhiwei:** Head of the migrant organisation Migrant Worker's Friend.

## **RESEARCHERS**

**Barry Li:** PhD on the training of migrants. Currently employed at the Human resources centre at Beijing Industry University.

**Wang Kan:** PhD student at Renmin University of China and head of the migrant organisation called On Action Migrant Labour. Wang's PhD focus on migrant workers.

**Tang Can:** researcher at Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS). Tang has done research on female migrant workers in the Pearl River Delta with Tan Shen, another researcher at CASS. Also, Tang has conducted a study of a Henan village and migrant workers.

# Appendix 2

## INTERVIEW GUIDE MIGRANT WOMEN

Name:

Age:

Place of origin:

Sivil status/children:

Duration of stay in the city:

Came with husband/children or alone?

### **Housing**

Can you describe where you live?

How did you find this house?

Do you have a renting contract?.

### **Children's education** (if they had children)

Does your child/children go to school? If yes, can you describe this school?

Is there a difference between a migrant school and a public school? If yes, what are the differences?

### **Health**

Can you tell me what do you do if anyone in your family got sick, where would you go?

Do you have health insurance?

### **Work**

Do you work? If yes, can you describe your work? If no, why not?

How did you find this job?

### **Coping**

Can you describe how is life as a rural and a woman in Beijing?

Do you have friends in the city? If no, why not?

**Migrant Women's Club**

Why do you come to the MWC?

What do you learn at the MWC?

**Future**

Can you tell me about your plans for the future?

# Appendix 3

## INTERVIEW GUIDE RESEARCHERS/HEADS OF MIGRANT ORGANISATIONS

Name:

Occupation/position:

Place of origin:

Can you describe migrant's situation in relation to the *hukou* system?

- Housing/education/work/health?
- What types of laws and regulations apply to migrants in the city?
- What kinds of certificates do they need to stay in the city?
- Are there many who do not register? If yes, why?

Can you tell about the relationship between the central state and local administrations?

How do migrants view the state?

How does the state view migrants?

What are migrant's biggest challenges?

What do the migrants do to manage in the city?

Can you tell me about how or if the state tries to improve migrant's situation?

Both interview guides worked as a starting point for the conversations. In some cases I asked only some of the questions and in others I added more questions.